

Vanity

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VANITY



CHAPTER I

ON this particular evening, at their splendid residence in the Park Monceau, the Breviers were giving a dinner followed by a reception. M. Brevier was an ex-deputy as well as ex-co-director of the colossal drapery establishment called the Four Seasons, a successful competitor of the Louvre and Bon Marché.

At the tradesman's entrance in the rue Murillo there had been no cessation all day long in the delivery of provisions and first delicacies of the season; in the passing to and fro of kitchen assistants and telegraph boys, even to a mounted soldier bearing a note from M. Morand, Minister of the Interior, who reminded his hosts not to await him in case of the Chamber, etc.

It was half-past six and not a member of the family had yet returned, neither monsieur, nor madame, nor mademoiselle, not even the Gilles d'Arbelles, the eldest daughter and son-in-law, who occupied the second floor.

Behind the wide lace blinds which softened the shining window panes, the numerous electric lights and the waves of heat from the hot-air radiator illuminated and warmed the luxuriously furnished

rooms on the ground floor where the old butler, Prosper, of dignified mien, with the profile of a Bourbon under his white hair, was putting the finishing touches.

Whilst re-arranging a limp cushion on an arm-chair and with one of his fingers, flicking off some cigar ash which had fallen upon the toe of a marble bathing girl, he cast a glance at the Buhl clock in the tapestry salon. Shrugging his shoulders—it was always so—he directed his steps toward the dining-room through the library and boudoir which was hung with mirrors. The snow-white table, laid in splendid order, looked fairy-like in its dazzling array of crystal and silver, with its profusion of roses in clusters and garlands overflowing from the centrepiece and candelabras. In this atmosphere of expectation, standing in front of the magnificent dinner service, the fluted cut glass, and the gilt-edged menus upon which the names of the guests were inscribed, the tall straight chairs resembled so many mysterious boon companions, armless and headless.

Prosper felt satisfied; the guests could arrive; also his master and mistress. After all it was not he, Prosper, who was going to receive the former and to exclaim in Madame's high voice: "Ah, dear friend, how happy we are to see you," or in Monsieur's cordial tones: "How good of you, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur."

After twenty-five years' service with the Breviers, having been witness of their difficult social beginnings, the ups and downs of their enterprises, and assisted at the final bewildering expansion of their fortunes, Prosper felt he had the

right to put himself on a familiar footing with them. His wife, Ursula, was Madame Brevier's lady's maid, and his niece, Rose, was mademoiselle's. In manner unctuous and peremptory, he exercised the authority of a priest fortified by long experience and satisfied with the consideration given him.

In the butler's pantry the jeering voice of Germain, who was the d'Arbelles' footman and who assisted on such evenings, could be heard mingling with the laughter of the other servants. Prosper, shocked at the noise and treading lightly on the tips of his toes, uttered an imperious "ssh!" the pantry was not the place in which to amuse themselves! that should be reserved for their rooms in the basement, their own dining-room lined with white porcelain where they could feel themselves at home and indulge in free conversation and gestures. Prosper only dropped his mask of seriousness at the right time and place; if he possessed the virtues of servitude he possessed also its vices and the most inseparable of them, hypocrisy.

Out of doors, in the cold darkness of the wintry streets, through the quivering lights, and ebb and flow of movement which streamed along the boulevards of the Paris of pleasure (whilst the Paris of labour overflowed the trains and tramways) the Breviers were separately making their way towards their home, each one a prey to the reflections which were created by their different tastes, and to the pre-occupations inspired by their personal destiny.

It was not so long ago that they found themselves, connected by their common origin and family resemblance, drawn together by habit and

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community of interests. To-day, starting from different points, they moved about like strangers amidst the swarming desert of the great city. Brevier was in his carriage on his return from a business meeting where his son-in-law had gone to catch him. Madame Brevier and Raymonde d'Arbelles were in their motor which had taken them up at the door of the skating-rink. Alice, accompanied by her friend Miss Smollett, was to be found on the roof of a tramcar after having attended a lecture on English literature at the Collège de France.

The carriage, on its pneumatic tyres, rolled over the macadamized streets as though on velvet, behind the quick stepping thoroughbreds. Brevier, wearied out in spite of his good nature, was listening to the interminable list of grievances which Gilles ground out in his neutral voice. The latter, with his fan-shaped light-blond beard, sat so upright that he seemed as if impaled. Clad in an unimpeachable frock-coat, his whole person conveyed the insupportable impression of a wish to appear distinguished, a model of all that is ideally correct. He was saying over again—

“You know that in spite of the shelter of your kind hospitality, ever since that unfortunate crash in the gold mines, where I dropped the third of my fortune, we do not succeed in supporting our establishment. Our debts go on lengthening and God knows if I don't practise economy! With the high rate of interest you allow us on the remainder of my patrimony and your daughter's dowry and my consul's salary (for my nomination cannot be far off) we could live very well, Raymonde and I,

in Foo-chow or in Chili, where I have been offered an excellent post. But she will not hear of our quitting Paris. Is it reasonable of her? If she would only consent to our spending less, but she won't listen to me. You ought to speak to her. . . . for instance, there's her blue fox fur wrap. . . ."

Brevier leant back moodily in his corner. Far more serious cares, such as money and business, were worrying him, and of late his health had not been very good. Gilles, annoyed him with his complaints. After having for a long time bestowed a protecting sympathy upon this son-in-law, whom he considered inoffensive, Brevier had finished by pitying him because he discovered him to possess a weak and domineering character, to be vain and commonplace. His paternal feelings also suffered when his daughter was touched upon. Although he preferred Alice because of some secret affinity with her, he was proud of Raymonde's superb beauty, and was indulgent towards her extravagances. She had her faults, it was true, but it was her husband's duty to correct them. He had relinquished his responsibility the very day upon which, in spite of his advice, she had determined to marry the Vicomte d'Arbelles.

To think that his wife, with all her common-sense, had been influenced in the same way! A title, a coronet on the visiting cards; how childish, it all was! He excused her because she was born a La Tourves d'Ayglades. Even if Jeanne had not been an altogether zealous associate of his career (for she was only interested in its material results), at any rate she had been a faithful companion. And he himself, plain Pierre Brevier, of plebeian

origin, son of a fishmonger in the old port of Marseilles, his high position reached by dint of unceasing labour, had he not been very proud to marry this beautiful and haughty young girl, daughter of an old Provence family, then ruined? Had she not exercised over him, by reason of her superior education, an ascendancy which still swayed him?

But all that did not prevent Gilles from behaving very stupidly. Why wasn't he the master? It was for the man to hold on to the purse-strings and draw them close. The thought did not present itself to Brevier that he himself had not lived as he pleased, and that the heavy conjugal burden was weighing upon his ever-ageing character. Had not his intellect and work served to satisfy the worldly tastes of his wife much more than his more simple ones? Nor would he more readily admit that the activities of his life were consumed in the conquest of gold which he despised for itself, but by which Pactolus fed the insatiable luxury of his family. He who counselled Gilles to possess a will, a man's energy, had he not failed in these attributes himself, did he not abdicate every day? He would not recognize the analogy, and he certainly did not complain. So long as Jeanne and Raymonde were happy, he was content. As for Alice, she never asked for anything. Gilles continued—

"It's just the same about that necklace with the three rows of pearls . . . just imagine that . . ."

At the mention of jewellery, Brevier felt in the pocket of his overcoat. The jewel-case was there containing a bracelet for his wife's birthday. There

was nothing too beautiful nor too expensive on these occasions. He saw in his mind's eye the queenly smile with which Jeanne would repay him. He was still very much in love, enslaved to his hearth, and had long remained faithful to his wife with the fidelity which men consider absolute when it does not take into account the memory of the fleeting infatuations of which the wife is ignorant. However, the temptations which had assailed his young manhood were not even lacking to his robust middle age, to his corpulent but active fifty-seven years.

Straightening his bent body, he eyed Gilles from head to foot. He thought what a bore he must be, what a stupid husband with his spiritless and miserly character.

Out of pity for Raymonde, he understood only too well that she refused to be exiled to the other ends of the world. Nevertheless, it might have been better for certain obscure reasons. He asked in a brusque tone—

“Do you owe very much?”

D'Arbelles hesitated, taken aback and distrustful. Why did Brevier ask that question? In order to pay up as he always had done? But for some months past he had lent a deaf ear. To let slip the gross amount might have the effect of chilling him right off. And yet in declaring less, if his father-in-law intended to help him, it would be absurd to run the risk of losing a certain sum.

“How much?” repeated Brevier.

Then d'Arbelles took the risk.

“At least twenty thousand francs. There is

the furniture of our last flat in the Boulevard Haussmann. The dressmaker——”

But Brevier did not insist upon knowing the details; he would pay, and that was sufficient. To ensure peace by freeing himself of these frequently recurring importunities, it was worth being bled. Raymonde would profit by his act. Her husband would sermonize her less, and she would be enabled to reopen her credit—for he had no illusions. She would begin all over again, devoured with the love of show and the frenzied desire of being beautiful. It was all very well so long as he was there to act providence.

But if one dark day Pactolus were to run dry, to be suddenly swallowed up in the sands! If the enormous work to which he had devoted his life, this colossal edifice, The Four Seasons, whose monumental façade stood upon a corner of the Boulevard Sebastopol, if suddenly like an earthquake it were to split, to break up! But how foolish it was to imagine anything of the kind. Only to think of it, and he experienced that agony, that haunting pain which seized him in the left shoulder. . . . Was he about to fall ill?

“I will remit you a cheque for twenty thousand francs,” he said quite simply.

Gilles, deeply moved, stammered his gratitude. He saw himself delivered of a nightmare for the fear of bankruptcy some day was intolerable to him; with this sum he would manage to snatch a portion from his creditors, and keep back a small balance. Decidedly Brevier was a good old soul. On the other hand, his business gains had been

immense, and this would cost him very little! Besides, who should one help if not one's children?

Having expressed his thanks, Gilles added mentally—

“Now if they could only influence Raymonde to live abroad,” and an expression of sourness and care crossed his face. It was not only ambition which fired him with the eagerness to go abroad. Doubtless he would feel a satisfied vanity to impersonate France by being present at official ceremonies in his silver-braided coat, his two-cornered hat under his arm, and a sword at his side. He would be able to represent his country still better if this dirty government would decorate him with the cross and if,—oh, what a pity—instead of belonging to the more modest consular body, he were attached to the higher ambassadorial service where his distinction would better make itself apparent! But he had other reasons for soliciting a position outside Europe.

The atmosphere of Paris was not healthy for Raymonde. This fever of pleasure, this cinématograph, of which she was not only a spectator but an active member, and, above all, this heap of admirers who followed in her train, there being one in particular who—Gilles repulsed this last image, but saw again and again his insolent face and strong thick-set figure, type of the active beast of prey, named Le Vigreux, who, wearing elegant clothes, but of simple manners, was one of the most powerful men in Paris, one of the kings of the yellow press, cynical and overpowering, the director of the morning paper called *La Vie*.

Amongst all those whose franklv expressed or

subtle homages pursued Raymonde, this one appeared the most redoubtable—his audacity recoiling before nothing.

Fiction, more impressive than facts, lent to a whirlwind of adventures concerning this man, the attraction of irritating contrasts, and of the mysterious seduction that good and evil paradoxically mixed in a character can exercise. Hated for his witticisms, with which he struck like a poisoned dagger, and equally admired for them, this man had never wanted for devoted mistresses and warm friends, the magnetism of his personality being added to by the prestige of his position, and the fascination of the scandals about him.

Gilles continued grumbling—

"When marrying me, she knew very well that my career would have to be made abroad. During the five years of our marriage we have passed two of them at Nuremberg, under continual protests from her, and three in Paris, which she prolongs without reason, injuring my future, compromising our resources. Can't you influence her?"

Brevier made a nervous movement.

"Oh, my dear friend, between the tree and the bark, you know!"

Truly he was paying dearly for having bought a moment's peace. Gilles abused it. And he felt an imperious desire not to feel the latter at his side, to open the carriage door under some pretext or other and drop him gently on the pavement before he could say another word, or venture to utter the particular and angry accusations, which he foresaw were coming. For although he preferred to remain deaf and blind, the thought of Raymonde

troubled him. It was too plain that she did not love her husband, and that her extravagant life was preparing the way for a possible downfall. But he was far from admitting that she could possibly fall in love with another man, his *bourgeois* view of things forbade such an idea. Any other woman might do so, but not his daughter. He muttered—

"If, instead of talking it over with her every morning, you said, once and for all, I will, she would be obliged to follow you. Aren't you her husband, damn it all!"

Gilles made a grimace. Yes, he was her husband, right enough. But what means could he employ to conquer her haughty disdain? She treated him like a little boy. Why had he allowed her to take this power? Why had he, the proud possessor of her beauty, let her see what a hold she had over him? For he had not obtained any influence over her thoughts and heart. To her he was a stranger, an intruder. He was her husband, the man whom she could deceive (the jealousy he felt pierced him with a physical torture), and he was resigned to not possessing her soul, provided that her body and her wealth were his. But the idea that haunted him was summed up in an insulting term that no one should apply to him. He could bear many things, but not *that*."

"And if she refused to come?" He sneered. "Would you call the police?"

The feeling of his powerlessness exasperated him. Ah! If he only dared to beat her during the stormy scenes which left him feeling deadly sick. If he had only known how to make his authority

irresistible by striking her with his fist! But she would answer quickly enough:—

“If you are not satisfied, let us separate. What prevents our having a divorce?”

No, he would not consent to a divorce, mainly because of his principles, and also because men and women did not divorce in his class of society. Besides, he was not such a fool as all that. “Why should he do so in order that she should make some other man happy? Rather let him be miserable.

Brevier murmured—

“My poor Gilles, you don't know how to manage her. Every woman is open to affection. Look at Duke how well he is trotting along! That's because Antoine holds him well in hand; with our last coachman he was always kicking between the shafts.”

Gilles only answered by a slight shrug of his shoulders. He was bitterly pondering over his suspicions and doubts. “On that very evening he would be receiving the first report of a detective agency—Trochard's—which was under discreet and responsible management. He had decided upon this move after many agonizing reflections and feelings of shame, but he was experiencing beforehand an emotion of relief mingled with fear.

Brevier did not trouble to break the silence; that was so much gained at any rate. The weight of his own cares, which were very heavy indeed, once more fell upon his heart.

CHAPTER II

GENTLY gliding between the carriages and making a free way for itself, with sudden rushes and as sudden stoppages, the motor-car, with its bonnet and its cyclopean eyes, conveyed the impression of a huge supple animal moved by intelligent springs.

In the soft warmth of the interior, lighted by an electric lamp, the rays of which fell upon the little clock fixed below the window, Madame Brevier and Raymonde exhibited in their eyes and cheeks the animation of a day devoted to shopping, paying visits, and skating. Wrapped in furs, tall and slender, with the same artificially tinted blonde hair, they appeared like sisters. Madame Brevier effected this miracle of persistence, only to be seen in Paris, by dint of certain hygienic precautions, alternating a two hours' walk every morning in the Bois with ice-cold douches and face massage at Madame Favorly's rooms. She fasted when the scales in her dressing-room showed a slight increase in her weight; her corset, which was a masterpiece of its kind, being exactly moulded to her figure. In order to retain her good looks, she drew upon the superabundant vitality of her Indian summer before her autumn, now so close at hand. To pay about three hundred visits during the winter, without mentioning dinners, first nights, opening days.

charity bazaars, condemned her to a rigorous restriction of her weight, and absorbed all her time.

Reasonably as she had lived, as long as it was necessary, during their period of thankless labour, her worldly tastes had increased in proportion to the unexpected golden gains piled up by her husband, and now being gathered by her in frantic haste. With the apotheosis of The Four Seasons, that gigantic building, spreading its double block of cut stone in the face of all Paris, with the profits figuring no longer in their thousands but in their millions of francs, she had been seized by a kind of vertigo, that intoxication of wealth which destroys so many brains. The past ten years of her life had proved a critical period to her as a virtuous woman, for she had given herself up to this feverish existence as she might have done to a lover, thinking only of shining in society and revelling in outbursts of unsatisfied desires and the incense of gratified vanity, abruptly shaken every now and then by the fear of growing old and the horror of dying. For some time past she had withdrawn from her husband's struggles and projects: Was not everything going on all right? Consequently she looked upon him as an inexhaustible gold mine, and if shadows passed over his brow, where the stiff iron-grey hair was whitening, and he complained of his liver or pains in his joints (evidently due to his sciatica, for which he had visited Aix-les-bains four years running), she was slow to admit that he was either ill or tormented with anxieties. She preferred to accuse him laughingly of paying too much attention to his ailments. Besides, he himself tried to

avoid making her feel uneasy by a delicacy of sentiment which would have touched her if the callousness of riches had not taken away something of the quivering sensitiveness preserved by those who know the meaning of suffering.

Nevertheless, now that his five years of co-directorship had expired, in accordance with the contract, and he had given up his place to the aggressive Hottmann's old manager, his reticence and half-revelations might have made Jeanne Brevier ask herself whether the prosperous Four Seasons, now arrived at its zenith, was not running risks of failure, due to the mysterious trickery of its competing neighbours. Her practical mind would have been able to face the dangerous possibilities into which that reckless financier, the dare-devil Hottmann, threatened to drag with him the second partner, the honest but weak-minded Roy Chancel. But she preferred to know nothing, to suspect nothing, to live in a whirl.

The same selfishness detached her from her daughter Alice, whom she looked upon as cold, and too different from herself, and drew her towards Raymonde, whose character was more in sympathy with her own; moreover, Raymonde was married, a fact which united them in their pleasures and their social relations in that freemasonry whereby women caution one another with a glance, and conspire with a smile.

The admirable faculty she possessed of believing only that which was pleasant to her, a strong illusion due to her southern temperament, safeguarded her maternal dignity. She contented herself with harmless confidences, and avoided investigating to

the bottom what it might be advisable to conceal. Also she considered her *rôle* as accomplished; was not her husband responsible for everything? Moreover she did not doubt for one moment that the solid principles which she had inculcated into Raymonde would preserve her from any imprudence that might be irreparable in the eyes of society.

Madame d'Arbelles was describing with enthusiasm the dinner dress which she had been trying on at Laquert's, the famous dressmaker of the rue de la Paix, where she enjoyed special reductions because she introduced her wealthy friends there.

"It is made of silk muslin, you know, Empire style, trimmed at the bottom with a band of real Irish lace and a thread of pink pearls on the stole"—her fingers lightly gave the idea. "Such a love of a dress! The bodice has trimmings of Irish lace, and the gold lace *bertha* is incrustated with pink pearls."

Madame Brevier, who had followed the prettily illustrated description with delighted attention, now gave some details as to her next visiting hat.

"It will be of white tulle spangled with silver, a large ostrich feather round it, and underneath, you know, a bunch of pink mother-of-pearl orchids."

Raymonde approved of it, and Madame Brevier, enumerating the visits she had paid, and returning to her gossip exaggerated to excess when talking about the people whom she called her friends, although no bond of sympathy united them. She knew them because her position required it, or sought them from vanity, as, for instance, the good Princess Sophia, or the aged Madame Aguilano, at whose house one met everybody

worth knowing in Paris. She spoke very quickly, in a dry and artificial tone of voice.

"Madame Dellus more and more resembles a mangy cat, and I hear that Maurice Ladorel is dropping her. The beautiful Madame Mérienne has taken up with that little Palud! She will soon be hunting for them at the school doors. . . . Ah! Madame de Cicé has been operated upon! It appears that she didn't have appendicitis after all! And what do you think, my dear Raymonde, our famous Dr. Le Dave, that serious man with his stiff-looking whiskers, was almost surprised yesterday in the very act . . . yes, imagine . . . in a . . . what is it called? . . . a house of assignation. Isn't it horrible? And he is dining with us this evening."

The lightness with which all this was said deducted somewhat from its immorality. It is the fashion of a certain class of Parisian society to overlook the exact bounds between good and evil, at least in their conversation; so long as they are amusing they are forgiven and, besides, as they are good hearted only half of the enormities which are hawked about are believed.

Whilst listening with enjoyment, Raymonde went over the list of her most urgent debts, those of which her husband was ignorant. It was useless to try and borrow of her mother, who would refuse because she never had any money about her. Fortunately her father was there. She knew how to cajole him! After all Raymonde had her good qualities. Always delightfully dressed, nobody was aware of the trouble she gave herself in contriving her spendthrift savings, running about to the best addresses, and putting herself on the best

of terms with the fashionable milliners and dress-makers. There were lots of women—and she suspected one or two whom she knew—who, in order to pay for their extravagant follies, listened to the equivocal suggestions whispered in their ears by the tradespeople who minister to women's luxurious tastes. She also—if she wished to understand—could hear of a very nice gentleman, open-handed, who had conceived a passion for her, etc., and it would finish by a rendezvous between five and seven o'clock at the same kind of a house where Dr. Le Dève . . . But she preferred to remain virtuous, and that was already something, placed as she was between a husband like Gilles, who was insupportable, and an eager imperious lover like Mark—for this was what she called Le Vigreux in the intimacy of their flirtation. Now he was something like a man!

No homage had affected her, no desire had warmed the cold coquetry with which she played with her admirers, like the ardent respect of this potentate, who, from the height of his newspaper position, lorded it over cabinet ministers, and brought up muzzled to his office the wolves of finance, terrorizing the best merited reputations. She knew, however, that in love as in business he was brutal, careless as to his treatment of a woman he no longer cared for, and of the man from whom he had reaped every advantage. Still more was she flattered by the constancy of his pursuit. She had subjugated the beast of prey, and experienced that exquisite fear of the animal tamer who sees fixed upon him the look and feels the breath of the creature who will devour him some day. In the

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mean while Mark loved her madly. She fingered in the invisible pocket of her muff the passionate letter he had written her that very morning.

She looked upon herself as both strong and good because she kept him within the limits of a true friendship which, however, she acknowledged to herself was becoming disquieting to her. The expectation of seeing him again soon (for she knew he would be her neighbour at table as happened on these occasions) moved her with a singular pleasure. At the same time Mme. Brevier was also thinking of the dinner. Alice would be seated next to M. Boyséon.

"Now, if only your sister would make herself agreeable, I am quite sure that, if she likes, that marriage would take place. The General's wife has given me to understand that she is impatient to see her son settle down; and it's plain enough he wants to himself. Alice pleases him, and he is quite handsome, especially in his uniform."

Count Boyséon, captain of a native artillery regiment, had just been attached to the military household of the President of the Republic. The epaulets of his pale-blue coat, and the gold bands on his trousers, showed off to great advantage his fine and manly figure. In the eyes of Mme. Brevier (born a d'Ayglades) he represented the ideal of a husband, young, etc., and her daughter could not easily find a better one. She clung to the idea because it was due to her own personal effort; and Alice must get married sooner or later.

Ever since Michel Lorin, a young man without money or position, a friend of Alice's childhood, had asked for her hand four years ago—"Ah! we

quickly sent you to the right about, my good fellow!" thought Mme. Brevier—the obstinate girl had refused several very suitable matches, and it was becoming ridiculous. If she had only loved Michel! At present he was a physician, and was beginning to be known. He was certainly a hard worker, but his temper was somewhat difficult. Well, Alice no longer cared for him, and the question was whether she had ever done so! You never can tell with young girls! As to him, his manners scarcely seemed to betoken the strength of a prolonged sentiment. Their teasing, mocking comradeship was composed more of antagonism and sulkiness than of mutual good-will.

Wounded to the heart at the time, Lorin, through pride, doubtless, preserved a grudge and wanted to show that he had risen above all that. They also saw less of him because he had been promoted chief of the laboratory at the Paul Bert hospital. He eluded their invitations under the pretence of work, but would be dining with them that evening.

"Yes," answered Raymonde, "Boyséon isn't a bad sort. He is too good-looking for my taste; but if he suits Alice . . ."

"She would, indeed, be too difficult to please," said her mother. "But one never knows what your sister is thinking; she is a closed book."

The motor veered round and rolled under the archway.

CHAPTER III

IN his dress suit, under an overcoat somewhat out of the prevailing fashion, Michel Lorin strode along Messina Avenue. Brr But it was cold ! Never mind, he had braved it on the outside of the tram-car instead of keeping himself warm on the inside. Everything of this kind was useful for exercising his will, for subjugating the sensual, selfish and cowardly animal which he carried within him like every other man.

Why had Brevier telephoned him to go earlier, before anybody else ? He thought of Alice. His thoughts turned immediately to her as if there must be some connection between the two things. But what connection ? Did they not pursue very different ways ? He dismissed the idea and tried not to see the beautiful, serious face of the young girl.

The sumptuous plate-glass windows delayed him along the way. In contrast with the wonderful roses, the mysterious-looking orchids, the voluptuous symphony of colours, the warm and fragrant leaves of flowers whose names he could not even recall, he saw again in memory the hideous lupus which was eating away the face of a bricklayer covered in white plaster whom he had persuaded to come to his consulting rooms.

He was in constant communion with the poor and knew how to gain their confidence. During the ten years that he had elbowed them in the over-populated Gobelins quarter of the city he had not yet got tired of their miseries and sorrows, and his tender heart was torn at the cry of a child in the hospital. A white bed in one of the wards, a woman whiter than the sheets, reappeared before his vision. She had been operated upon the previous evening, and with her dilated pupils, horrible in their intensity, she was going to die. How many had he not seen sinking down into the mysterious shadows—into the tragical silence!

The darkness, the cold, the lugubrious winter time assailed him. He thought of the many without shelter, of their empty stomachs, of the invalids and cripples especially, of his mournful procession of patients. "How sad life was, this badly arranged life, with its iniquitous distribution of poverty and wealth, the eternal injustice which has endured as long as man himself."

On arriving at the iron gates of the Park Monceau, he recognized the motor-car without being able to distinguish whether it was Alice or Raymonde at Mme. Brevier's side. He slackened his pace in order to leave time for them to enter. Why did he do this? Was it due to his unconquerable shyness, and to the constraint he felt at differing so greatly from them in his ideas and sentiments? Or was it due to the re-awakening of a dull pain which he had tried to conquer, to the remembrance of the early mistake he had made, the wound which his pride maintained was cauterized, even cured?

The door of the motor-car slammed to. The ladies made their way through the glass doors of the vestibule. No, it was not Alice. And, if it were, what would it matter to him? In the large hall, the purple rug, bordered with copper, sank softly under one's feet. Puffs of heat issued from the hot-air stoves which vibrated in waves, and lifted the leaves of the palms standing between the yellow marble pillars, and spreading up the wide oak staircase, lighted by gilt caryatides. All this heavy luxury enervated Michel. He remembered their modest fifth-story flat in the rue Condorcet, where, as a child, he breakfasted with them every Sunday. He remembered the hearty simplicity which reigned there, the dinners without ceremony, and the puddings so frequently made with whipped eggs. How distant it all seemed!

No envy was mingled with the uneasy sensation that the Brevier's ostentation and parade of wealth aroused in him. He was suffering only from a comparison between the past and the present, between their real merits and their acquired wants. He judged them to be too rich, that was all, when there was so much poverty around.

Without underrating the triumphant success of The Four Seasons and, at the same time, admiring Brevier for his prodigious labour; without ignoring the facts that Ravenot the late founder of the firm (who was first a small tradesman before becoming the head of the concern) had been a philanthropist, and whilst doing him and his successors justice for having been good to their numerous employees, such as sharing the

profits, instituting schemes of life insurance and life pensions, building a hospital at Passy and a baby's home in the Bois,—despite all these considerations he nevertheless experienced complicated sentiments, difficult to analyze. Neither his heart nor his reason was fully satisfied. It was true that Brevier was an irreproachable husband and father, and generously devoted to those belonging to him, his work, his health, his money. As a master, Brevier had shown himself to be just, benevolent and overflowing with desire for the common prosperity. But all this magnificent effort had not gone beyond the narrow family limits and the larger limits of the business. The altruism which gave a subsistence to hundreds of human beings was made subservient to the selfish success of a capitalistic undertaking whose practical usefulness was beyond dispute, but as to the absolute morality of which, Michel reserved his opinion.

He never entered that gigantic emporium without feeling miserable, invaded as it was by a crowd which he saw surging backwards and forwards in dark streams between the counters piled up with merchandise. Seized, hustled, pushed hither and thither, he understood, whilst dully revolting against the system, the vertigo that possessed this crowd with its greedy eyes, its foraging hands. On the faces of the women he read the desire to buy or carry away everything they saw, and he calculated the demoralizing effects exercised by all this fascinating display. Silk stockings, dainty slippers, filmy lace under garments, costly dresses, hats trimmed with flowers and birds. everything.

in fact, which adds to women's beauty; rouge, scent, eye-brighteners. Toilet articles, exquisite furniture and priceless carpets; enervating luxuries of all kinds, dangerous temptations, all of which excited to theft, and oftentimes brought about ruin!

It was with a kind of fear as before a catastrophe, that he had seen the enormous concern increase by leaps and bounds towards which all Paris rushed when the new stock was exposed, at each recurring season. The whole length of the Boulevard Sebastopol was thronged with such a compact crowd that even the carriages could not pass along.

He was well aware that social necessity brought about these excessive centralizations. There was a saving of time and the convenience of finding everything under the same roof, and from this point of view the originality of The Four Seasons defied all competition. If you wanted, to have luncheon the lift hoisted you up to the restaurant erected on the glass roof. If you were ill, you could be conveyed, by means of the sliding platform, to the doctor's office, where a medical service was maintained. Should you wish to purchase a motor-car you descended to the machine shop. An exhibition of painting and sculpture contained the names of the greatest artists. The lecture-hall and theatre were always full, and every month a five o'clock tea was held to which the *élite* of society crowded.

Brevier, first of all, and then Hottmann, each keeping himself abreast of the times, had done more and more to strike the imagination. It

remained to be seen whether these undeniable advantages and the real cheapness of the purchases compensated for the drawbacks, the worthlessness of the workmanship, the lowering of wages, and also if these palaces of desire, with all their bluff of advertisement, were not rather traps laid for the idle, legal plunderers of the middle and lower classes, a monstrous sieve through which passed all the savings of the poor. Did they not rather unchain the itching for spending? Did they not rather lash up the rage to be showy? Did they not increase that voracity to enjoy ease and comfort at any price which has become a public danger?

It was not like this formerly, and Michel recalled to mind from his distant past the rustic furniture and poor engravings of the humble flat, which had been occupied, even in the days of his greatest renown, by his father Buffiert, the famous surgeon. . Yes, his father, for Michel Lorin bore only the name of his mother, a pure-hearted courageous woman, whom Buffiert (whose wife was the inmate of a lunatic asylum) had not been able to marry. Neither had the law permitted the father to recognize his son. But, this paternity, admitted quite simply, much to the scandal of his enemies and of certain foolish people, had been supported and recognized by two or three old friends.

Amongst them Brevier had acted the part of godfather and guardian to this orphan who had been isolated in life at an early age and suffered from his false position. So Michel, divided between his profound gratitude and affection on the one

hand, and on the other by his rigid independence and the clear-sightedness of a mind enfranchised from many accepted ideals, suffered deeply when he had to condemn those to whom he owed so much. To appear ungrateful would have caused him horror. Despite his clear-cut convictions he did not consider himself either a moral or political reformer. And yet it was with an ever-increasing feeling of uneasiness that he re-entered this sumptuous residence where the artistic ornaments, the beautiful pictures of the English school, and the Beauvais tapestries seemed less the result of the amateur's patient labour, than the spoils of the all-conquering millionaire. And for some time past this feeling of uneasiness had been growing greater.

That very evening—was he in a particularly nervous mood?—he experienced a slight anguish whilst, preceded by Prosper, he was passing through those glaring reception rooms, with their heavy atmosphere of expectancy. No, the Breviers, whom he had known with such different hearts, could not, intoxicated as they were to-day, be in the right. No, indeed! In spite of existing facts and the fatality of habit, which weighed upon him, and although he inclined towards that indulgence which we extend to our intimates, and took into account their social position, training, circumstances, still he could not approve of this wavering of conscience, once so upright, these compromises of character thrust upon them by this kind of life. There was Brevier's weakness, for instance, in abandoning the reins to others; Mme. Brevier's snobbish pride, and—for he saw it clearly enough—

the corruption by which this cursed vanity was spoiling Raymonde (a beautiful fruit already spotted) and threatening Alice to-morrow.

And why not? Contagion was there . . . He had learnt by chance, not through them—an added bitterness—that they wished her to marry this Boyséon fellow, a soldier of fortune, with a heavy past of debts and follies. Oh yes! He had obtained every information about him. He was brave at duels, and when under fire in his colonial campaigns, ready to risk his own life and that of others, but not brave when confronted with silent duties and daily sacrifices. He had the mode of thinking of a man of his class, disloyal to his ancestry and to the society to which he belonged, and possessed no more honour than was actually necessary. Haughty with men, he had a feline attachment to women, a twofold aspect of his contempt for both sexes. The Boyséon's coat-of-arms bore "My pleasure, my sword." *

At the thought that Alice could give herself to a being so different from herself and from him, Michel, it seemed as though his most intimate fibres were being burned with red-hot pincers. It was not that he was jealous, not a bit of it. By what right, indeed? When one doesn't love, one isn't jealous. But this marriage was idiotic, and that was why such an idea, improbable and absurd as it was, made him very angry. . . . Alice, indeed! He could not feel impartially where she was concerned. Sometimes, indeed, he failed in generosity and justice towards her, but from that to suppose that she might not be altogether insensible to Boyséon's advances, she, with her intellect, her

character, her noble and delicate tastes, oh, this was the impossible aspect of it!

Why impossible? These alliances of name and fortune were contracted every day. The parties have no love for one another, but live under the same roof. It was the accepted thing, and quite in keeping with the ambitions of these good Breviers! What a triumph for the girl's mother, born a La Tourves d'Ayglades, a fact they would not fail to call attention to on their invitation cards! A suitable couple indeed! What a brilliant figure they would cut in their turn in the Parisian whirl! Alice. . . . Ah! Ah! That would be too funny! "The Countess Boyséon's carriage stops the way," would be bawled out, and during the evening she would expose her nude shoulders to the sensual admiration of voluptuaries. No! He never would have believed it. Formerly Alice gave promise of turning out so much better when Raymonde and she were preparing at the College Sévigné, for their matriculation, for succeeding in which their enormously rich and miserly Aunt Eloi praised them, saying, "You never know what may happen!" This marriage should not take place! He would prevent it!

All at once he recovered himself. "Am I going mad?" No! he was suffering, that was all.

Up a little private staircase Prosper left him, after knocking at the door behind which a bolt was unfastened.

"Is that you, Michel?" called out Brevier. "Come in."

CHAPTER IV

BREVIER was in his bath-room, just finishing his toilet. The electric bulbs crudely showed up his heavy torso and his head, the latter bearing somewhat the resemblance to a benevolent white boar. As his right hand was manipulating the steam faucet it was with some effort that he reached out the left one, which was so hot that Michel retained it, seeking the pulse with his thumb. The artery gave him the sensation of a whip-cord. He scrutinized his face, and once more read in the prominent and flexuous temporal arteries the signs of over-fatigue, the wear and tear of a generalized arterio-sclerosis.

These signs alarmed him. He knew only too well that Brevier, ever since he was no longer a director, was killing himself with work just as much as formerly, taking no rest, except during those heavy ceremonial dinners, and that he was being asphyxiated by soirées and theatres. He was filled with stupefaction at the way he had changed within six months! Here was yet one more that Paris, in its fever for gold, was consuming, and Michel felt a sudden fear, and had the presentiment, without being able to explain why or how, of something vague and awful, of a misfortune about to take place. Immediately afterwards he

said to himself that it was ridiculous! This solid Pierre, whose chest remained sound and whose heredity was of the sober resisting race of the south, built on a rock and cemented by the sun! A few months at the seaside would put him all right again. And, moreover, he would not always be toiling like a voluntary convict to gratify his wife's, Raymonde's, and her husband's craving hunger for pleasure.

"You are not ill?" he asked, with a re-assuring smile.

"I am not very well, my dear boy. Look here, I am suffering from a pain which darts upon me suddenly. It's that damned sciatica! I don't believe Le Dave understands it a bit."

He extended his left arm, pointing towards the region of his heart.

At these words and gesture Michel recovered all his filial tenderness. The thought that this vigorous toiler could be so ill, touched him. It was the first time that Brevier had consulted him for anything beyond a few minor ailments. He had either Le Dave or Firmyn of the Academy of Medicine, the princes of the profession. . . .

"Let me see," said Michel.

He began to auscultate him whilst asking questions; then he made him stretch himself out in order to feel the loins and the stomach, recording in his memory the pathological symptoms. There was hereditary gout, for instance, chronic attacks of the stomach and liver. Pierre stated that he experienced some difficulty in breathing, but percussion of the lungs was re-assuring. Perplexed, he returned to the heart, and gave it a prolonged

examination, and finally caught the sound of a murmur at the base and a roughness. It was the aortic valves, this was the trouble, sclerosis of the coronary arteries!

Raising himself up he observed the rheumatic fingers, like the claws of a lobster, which Brevier was spreading out flat against his shoulder.

"That pain reaches here, you know."

Michel experienced a shock and recognized the trouble instantaneously. This last examination had solved his doubts—his unfinished diagnosis. The heap of proofs already bore in upon him, strangled him like the water-weeds gripping a swimmer. Le Dave's wrong treatment, and he a man of note, too, confounded him. Never in this world was it sciatica! As for his massage with balsams and sulphur baths, they were so many poultices on a wooden leg. It would have been better if he had been treated for rheumatismal neuralgia!

That which lay in wait for Pierre was far more serious and terrible. The insidious disease, lying in ambush, as it were, which he perceived in all its danger, and which carried conviction to his mind, in spite of his revolt against it, was angina pectoris, true angina, which strikes like lightning and produces syncope of the heart. And it might fall upon him at any moment, without any warning, after one of his attacks supervening on fatigue or an emotion.

If, however, he were mistaken! He was only too anxious to deceive himself, and therefore continued questioning him. His want of appetite, and other signs of a more intimate nature, but confirmed the symptoms already noted. The

inexorable certainty of the practitioner united to the cruel scientific pleasure of knowing the truth kept his thoughts sorrowfully fixed on the diagnosis he had made. Yes, it was that!

"Well?" asked Brevier in a tone of indifference.

In his eyes Michel read the eternal uneasiness of the human animal run to earth, and imploring help. He knew well that anxious look so quickly re-assured by a falsehood, that guardian angel of illusion. It was the indestructible love of life, the primitive force which revived for the time being all those cancerous and diseased incurables, those least interested in continuing to suffer, those who should the most have aspired to oblivion, who passed before the head-physician and his clinical clerk in their white aprons, during their hospital rounds.

He did not deny the possibility of a neurosis of the heart, but admitted it with clever reservations. Brevier was comforted to find that his illness was given a change of name. He felt angry with Le Dave for the failure of his treatment. He inquired with curiosity, "Is that the reason of the palpitations?"

Michel, knowing that patients like to hear their cases talked about, spoke of the heart's innervation, and he ventured a remark about the antagonism between the pneumo-gastric and the sympathetic nerves. Brevier, enchanted, without understanding, agreed:—

"Quite so, quite so."

Michel was reminded of Number 8 in the ward, that morning, holding up his neck with its live tissues all exposed as if destroyed by an enormous

fleshy spider. This man, condemned to die, smiled beatifically whilst listening to Dr. Aumussat discussing his case at the bedside.

"There's nothing dangerous, as a matter of fact?" hinted Brevier, now satisfied.

Michel hesitated. "Was there still time to do anything? But a moment ago Pierre's anguish had been too plainly visible. It was better that he should remain in ignorance.

"No, not absolutely dangerous. But, for some time to come, you must relinquish coffee, liqueurs, your good cigars, and you must eat very little, and go early to bed."

"Is that all your treatment?" said the other, ironical and almost suspicious.

Should he suggest local applications, such as ice, blisters? But Pierre would be frightened.

"I am going to write a prescription for you."

He drew a notebook and stylographic pen from his pocket, and scribbled down the classical formula, viz. Iodide of Sodium and distilled water.

"At any rate you're not going to poison me, my good fellow," said Brevier, pleased.

"If you should be suffering any pain this evening, I shall be able to give you a morphia injection."

But Pierre no longer had any pain. The oracle had spoken and the auto-suggestion was operating. Michel assisted him into his coat and tied his white cravat for him.

Brevier, touched also, looked at him attentively, at his slender but robust build, his strong chin and high forehead, his fine eyes, shining with goodness in the sallow, worn face, which expressed energy

and pride. This young doctor's worth was in some measure due to him, and he could be proud of it. He loved him like a father—with an affectionate constraint—for he was conscious that something—he couldn't tell exactly what—during the last few years had changed their relations towards one another, and this thought saddened him. Was Michel angry with him because of their refusal? Had he less pleasure in their society? Why was it? There was a shadowy corner, somewhere, unexplored. All this, added to his painful pre-occupation, moved him to say, "Tell me the truth, at any rate, my dear boy. If I have any horror of illness, you understand, it is not because of myself, I have no fear of death, it is because of them."

Yes, it was always of them he thought. Of Jeanne, who was so happy in blooming like a summer rose; of Raymonde, unhappily married; of Alice, whose fate was not yet pronounced. These womenkind of his, who were in need of him, of his prestige, of his position, of that magic shield which only success and money can procure. What would become of them if anything happened to him? And then, if he had only been able to realize his fortune, which was invested in The Four Seasons, and exposed to Hottmann's reckless speculations! Oh, why had he yielded to the plausible eloquence, the representations of this confounded fellow? Everything he possessed—or nearly everything—his wife's marriage settlement, Gilles' and Raymonde's curtailed patrimony, even Alice's dot, that he was reserving for her, was risked in this trap. The slippery descent—the fear of the

yawning gulf—all that he alone knew! Who would not have shrugged their shoulders at the unkind rumours which sometimes are circulated, fore-runners of misfortune, for he was not aware that they were already in circulation. The Four Seasons? Why should any one suppose that invisible worms were probably undermining the triumphant building from summit to base? For, in spite of Hottmann's ready assurance, Brevier now, without any means of controlling him, thrust on one side and held at bay by flattering attentions, scented an ever-increasing peril. There were rumours of risky financial deals, a call for a new limited liability company formed by watered capital, crushing enterprises, risky investments at the Bourse, purchase of shares imposed upon the employees, who thus became associated in the risks.

However, the dividends were being maintained, and unless Hottmann was resorting to fraudulent manœuvres. . . . It was true that Roy Chancel, the second director, was there, but he was so absurdly incompetent and completely overborne by the other. If he dared to admit his whole thought, that which disquieted him more than all else, without his being able to justify his tardy mistrust, was Hottmann himself, with his over-candid eyes, his open face, his exaggerated expressions of loyalty. Bah! After all, Hottmann had a genius for business, everybody had noticed it when he was under old Ravenot. The Four Seasons owed too much to him to permit him to be condemned without proofs. Besides, Brevier would have an out-and-out talk with him the very next day, and, if necessary, would withdraw his capital. He would arrange an interview that

evening with Hottmann, who, with his wife, was coming to the dinner.

Michel felt Brevier's eyes upon him, and attributed his distressed look to the anxiety which his health caused him. He tried to smile, but something rose in his throat.

"If you have only telephoned me about your palpitations, you can be easy, my dear guardian. You will live to be old and a grandfather of ten."

"Ah!" said Brevier, regretfully, "I should like nothing better——" This was also a cause of sorrow to him. Raymonde had not wished to become a mother, hating the child which for several months makes the woman suffer, causes her to lose her beauty, and withdraws her from society; and he could not understand this. He worshipped all life, and had a passionate love of his family. "What a pity," he thought, "to deprive one's self of a child, this little miracle, with its fresh young brain, and its pretty body!" And there were heaps of women like that nowadays." He shrugged his shoulders, saying, "Oh, by the bye, there was something else I wanted to ask you. What would you think of taking Le Dave's place at the hospital and the children's home? It would mean two hours' duty every morning, and five hundred francs a month. This capital idea emanated from Alice. You are young, energetic and well-known. The Committee thinks well of you, for I sounded it to-day."

He awaited an outpouring of thanks. This position was an enviable one, and much sought after; it meant easy circumstances, time for work upon one's own account, a living without trouble, almost freedom. But Michel's face had become

impenetrable at the mention of Alice's name. A sudden embarrassment paralyzed him. Struggling with himself, he tried to read his own thoughts and did not succeed.

His pride forced back his affectionate gratitude. Why did she interfere? Had he requested any favours? He had no intention of being indebted to her for either position, money, or influence. This proposition humiliated him, as though it were a compensation offered, not only for his immediate sufferings, but the older ones; although he was obliged to confess to himself that neither Alice nor any one else could intend anything so ridiculous.

"Are you thinking of Le Dave? He is going away. He wants to take a well-earned rest." With a wink, Brevier emphasized his slight allusion to the temperamental excesses of the old physician.

But Michel had made up his mind, and his forehead was marked with obstinacy as he answered—

"Thank you very much, but I cannot accept the offer. I am deeply moved by it, and recognize all its advantages, but I prefer my hospital life, my laboratory researches, my patient work. . . ." He did not add, "my poverty."

Brevier, after having insisted a little, shook his head, and said—

"It is wonderful how closely you resemble your poor father in these things. When once he had made up his mind about anything, the devil himself could not have changed it. But you will think it over, and perhaps Alice will know how to make you decide."

His tone changed, and looking straight at Michel,

as if he were watching the effect of his revelation, Brevier continued—

“Do you know that she is probably going to be married?”

Michel tried to smile, but his mouth contracted.

Boyséon! Brevier went on to explain in detail. It was not he who cared particularly about the match; it was his wife who had managed the affair.

Still Michel had nothing to say. He had not even believed the monstrous event possible, but, since Pierre himself announced it to be near, why, he not only saw his misfortune, but touched it in fact. Similar fears had already besieged him. Since his repulse, Alice had been sought after by others, but she had shown them all the door, and it consoled him to know that she did not belong to any one else. Of course, it was understood, so he said to himself, that he did not love her, but what wrung his heart was the fact that she might love another and be loved by him.

“I am very pleased to hear this good news,” he said at last, not being able to do otherwise, and enraged at the lie, for he did not wish her any happiness really. The bitterness he felt towards her parents was exhaled in hatred against her. Ah! that she might know what it was to be deceived, to suffer from a broken heart, betrayed affections, tears, jealousy! This hateful wish so quickly formulated astounded him. Was he capable of such baseness? Could he, who at bottom wished that she might be happiest amongst the happy, whatever might come to pass, and in spite of everything, could he call down misfortune upon her?

“It's not yet accomplished,” said Brevier, in a

worried tone. Doubtless Boyséon, according to Jeanne, united in himself all the proprieties, but his aristocratic self-sufficiency, his stormy past, the moral contradictions in his character that Brevier suspected, shocked the plebeian side of him—the successful *bourgeois*, and awakened in him the indefinable antipathies of man against man, and caused his paternal instincts uneasiness. Would Alice be happy? “But why not?” he said to himself, when under his wife’s influence; and at other moments he would exclaim, “It is madness!”

These contradictory feelings irritated him, and Michel’s calmness chilled him. He had believed and vaguely hoped that . . .

Michel was thinking with bitter emotion of all that might have been—of all that had been. How mad of him to have loved her, madder still to have declared his love! How they had repulsed him! Pierre had done so with a surly good humour, but Mme. Brevier had let him plainly see her disdain. Great heavens! how had he dared to raise his eyes to their daughter, poor devil as he was, only a bastard, without position or wealth?

And Alice herself, at the time and since then, had behaved inexplicably. Doubtless she was very young when he had requested her hand in marriage, but surely she had known of it. If she had cared for him she would have been able to let him divine it. Could she not have inspired him with the strength to wait, the will to realize a future for which, in the silent reserve of her attitude, she would devote herself patiently and faithfully? It was quite clear to him that she had never loved him. He was not handsome enough nor fascinating

enough to win her. He was not stylishly dressed. His countenance bore the marks of the conscientious melancholy produced by his profession. With him life must be earnest and severe. No, she did not love him. Unjust as it might be, he was bitterly angry with her. The worst is that he had let her know this, and thus, through his wounded pride, his apparent indifference towards her, the misunderstanding was perpetuated which prevented all mutual confidence, and imparted to their intercourse a dry and quarrelsome tone, he being aggressive and awkward, and she shocked at his manner without letting him perceive it.

"I proffer Alice my best wishes," he said.

Brevier lowered his eyelids. This short and unqualified approval, although expected, provoked him. Was Michel already cured? He almost regretted it. By a very human contradictoriness of feeling, at the moment when he had finally ceased to think of it, and after having treated it with too much disdain, he recognized the value of a union between these two young people who had grown up together. Even now he admitted the existence of a remote possibility, and nourished a problematical belief in those strange occurrences of life which lead to the goal by the most roundabout ways. However, it was too late, and it was a pity! So much the worse! He ventured to say, with an air of embarrassment, whilst his voice hardened somewhat—

"Are you sincere? Don't you feel any regret? In other words, you no longer care for Alice?"

On the defensive, Michel retorted, "You forbade me to think of her."

"And you were angry with us, and are still angry. Don't say it is not so; because you had every right to be. However, be just. Could I give her to you with my doubts as to your future, and contrary to her mother's wishes? As for herself, she was ignorant of her own feelings, being only a child."

"Don't let us speak of it; all that is past."

"But you still think of it."

"I?"

"Yes, you! I have not been blind to the coldness which has crept between us, your infrequent visits, and your attitude towards Alice and hers towards you. Well, I am glad of the opportunity to explain myself once and for all. We underrated you. . . . We ought to have done more credit to your will power, your intellect, and we might have given some promise as to the future, even if we couldn't exactly pledge ourselves. Yes, I confess that we were in the wrong. It is because I am your friend, your ally, Michel, much more than you imagine to be the case, and because circumstances are no longer quite the same, also personally I could not at the present time wish for my daughter a man worthier of her—although I ought not to say this to you, with your cursed pride,—it is on account of all these considerations that I ask you whether you no longer love Alice, and if I do not read your heart better than you do? Are you not struggling against the sentiment that you have, loyally enough, tried to stifle? Are you not listening to the voice of some silly pride, the consequences of which may be irreparable, but which, after all, leaves you a fighting chance and

a hope that, feeble as they may be, you would be very foolish, my dear boy, let me impress upon you, not to grasp while you have the opportunity?"

Michel had grown paler under his guardian's clear-sightedness, his benevolent, if roughly expressed, words, and the unexpected temptation. If only he could abandon his miserable masculine pride, show himself just as he was to the young girl, with his wounded heart; chase this nightmare once and for all and be forgiven the wrongs which passion alone had caused him to commit! But no! Since she had not been able to revolt against this Boyséon, he would not lower himself to struggle. Besides (and he could not forget it) Alice was very eligible, an heiress with expectations, for some day she would succeed to her Aunt Eloi's immense wealth . . . in fact, she was too rich. He had been made to understand this formerly, to divine that such was the case. He could not endure the thought that his disinterestedness might be suspected once more.

"Since you speak to me, guardian, with this frankness, it is true that I have suffered. But has my courage failed me? I went away, and threw myself into work. I have lived through it. I thank you for your kindness, it does me honour, it goes to my heart, but I am consoled, for I am no longer in love." He said within himself, "I lie; I am lying like a fool. You know that I love her still, and she also perhaps. So much the worse for my stupid pride. I would like to please him, and claim my rights." But, at the same time, he knew that something stronger than himself, more imperious than

his will, would step between, and he would with a savage joy twist the sword in his wound.

Brevier observed him closely. "All the same, you are unhappy."

"Not at all," he returned in almost a hard tone of voice, and then added, "I don't complain."

There was a long silence.

"Of course," replied Brevier, "if you don't love Alice any more . . . so much the better, perhaps! Take it that nothing has been said by me. But don't be so severe with us . . . we love you . . . you and ourselves can never be strangers to one another. Promise to come back and visit us as you used to do. You are like our son, since we never had one of our own."

Michel, hollow-eyed, wanted to throw himself into his arms and confess everything to him. But his unconquerable pride whispered within him, "Let him keep her, let her go to the other, let her accomplish her destiny. You are poor, Michel Lorin—and it is Lorin not Buffiert—do not overstep the barrier you despise, leave these good people to their creature comforts, their wealth, and their selfishness. Pull yourself together and leave them! Think of the poor creatures who are suffering, bleeding, dying. Remember the thousands who are hungry, who are tortured by misery, and disease; of all those beings more to be pitied than you, Michel, and forget yourself."

Brevier looked at his godson with an expression at once full of kindness and sadness. He suddenly felt an old man's need of sympathy, the desire to receive consolation as well as to bestow it. This moment seemed a solemn one to him because of

his secret mental anguish, and because he was suffering from a return of the darting pains in his shoulder. He was also experiencing certain regrets and remorse at the involuntary injury which had been done Michel, and which he seemed powerless to remedy. He neither felt satisfied with himself nor others. In a word, Brevier was not happy. And thus feeling, he opened up his arms, saying, "Come, my son, let us embrace."

CHAPTER V

AFTER the soup, *crème sultane*, had been consumed in silence, Prosper, assisted by three footmen, solemnly handed round *carp à la royale*, brought from the river Creuse.

Amber-tinted wine sparkled in the wine-glasses, and conversation was becoming more animated, words being bandied to and fro, nearly all the guests knowing one another. With an eye to everything, a smile for all, Mme. Brevier, whose firm white neck emerged from the close-fitting bodice of her ruby velvet gown, was enthroned between the Cabinet Minister, Morande, and the Japanese Ambassador, the Marquis Tolo. On her wrist flashed the soft lustre of the pearl bracelet which Pierre had brought her for her birthday, while she was finishing her toilet and her flesh was still glowing from her bath. She was experiencing the unalloyed intoxication of a queen who was always beautiful, and who never tired of exciting men's homage, admiration, and envy. This intense vanity caused her an exquisite pleasure. She had cleverly selected her guests and her *menu*, and this dinner summed up all Paris on a small scale. The *Boyséons* represented the aristocracy and the army; M. Leloup d'Ygré, judge of one of the higher courts, the Bench; Dr. Le/Dave, science; Maitre Vapaille, the Bar;

and Mascarnes, the composer, and Trac, the caricaturist, the arts. Le Vigreux represented the universal power of the press, and Mme. Hottmann symbolized merchant princedom in the absence of her husband, who, at the last moment, found himself too indisposed to attend. The banks, with their millions, were typified by Aunt Eloi, who, heavily seated in her chair, and in an outrageously low-necked dress, had arms as big as thighs and a white, swollen, diseased-looking face, covered with rice-powder.

Mme. Brevier had already inspected her women friends with that penetrating look which exposes their imperfections and sizes up the price of their lace. Mme. de Boyséon, the general's wife, carried her long fleshless head on high. In former days her ugliness, which possessed a certain charm, had been capable of inspiring sudden passions; the laugh issuing from her toothless gums and the fire of her bold eyes still made her remarked. Mme. Leloup d'Ygré, with her soured aspect, personified unyielding hypocrisy. Mme. Hottmann was the type of the beautiful Jewess. She was fair, with a soft skin, heavy dark eyes, and a slow, false smile, which contrasted with the somewhat untamed ardour of Mme. Roy-Chancel, who might have been called a Spanish woman, with clusters of crimson carnations adorning her jet-black hair. Mme. Le Vigreux, dressed in perfect taste, possessed of unaffected manners and a beauty whose features had been refined by sorrow and moulded by anxiety and secret humiliations, alone exhibited the distinction of a superior soul. She loved her husband, and remained true to him in spite of his

treachery; Mme. Brevier dared not think of all she must have suffered. As for Mme. Mascarnes, with her huge bulk, whose vulgarity as a whilom housekeeper and mistress, married in haste, kept the musician on thorns; as for the pretty wife of M. Morande's private secretary, and two more women of no particular account, Mme. Brevier only doled out to them carefully measured attentions.

Smiling at some trivial compliment paid her by M. Morande, asking the Marquis Tolo whether he had not found Mme. Bartet divine the evening before, glancing rapidly at Raymonde, who was listening to Maître Vapaille without hearing what he said, and then at Alice to see whether she was talking to Boyséon, making a sign to Prosper to partly open a window behind the heavy curtains—all these manœuvres were only to show off her easy self-possession. She felt as if she were the conductor of an orchestra, who at his will accelerates or slackens the performance of a symphony; the confused murmur of the dining-room intoxicated her like exquisite music performed for her benefit alone. It was for her that the baskets of roses exhaled their perfume, and towards her that converged the looks of homage. She believed herself to be the luminous centre of this gathering of choice spirits.

The two beings whom she cared about the least at this moment were her husband, tired and bent, seated opposite her, and Michel, looking paler than usual, at the end of the table. She had no suspicion of the dramas which agitated the souls of the members of her own family, of the cares

and anxieties that the majority of her guests disguised under their laughing chatter. She only saw the pleasurable excitement of it all. The dinner was a success, and the haunch of venison, which hailed from Cumberland, was exceedingly good.

Where she only employed a superficial examination, Le Vigreux, true master of reading men's minds, monocle in his eye, pierced into their consciences with a cold glance, and took the measure of the manikins, whose threads he held and whom he could make sing and dance. Had not vanity, self-interest, ambition, already delivered up to him almost every one present? There was the white-bearded Morande, a foolish old parliamentarian, worn in the service of every lobby intrigue, good for everything and fit for nothing; his capacity passing as easily from Public Instruction to Commerce as from the Department of War to that of the Interior and subsidizing *La Vie* from the secret service funds. But he could only be attacked within certain limits.

Tolo, the ambassador, artful in every intrigue, like all Orientals, who knew better than any one the cost of two or three big sensational articles advocating the new Japanese loans.

How did Mascarnes expect the continuance of Terpsichore—that frost of his—if not from the laudatory notices lavished broadcast by the theatrical press agents? And there was Trac, who was revealing to his scared neighbour at the table, the winter's amusements and the nicknames in vogue, even those of people present that evening—amongst them some which were funny, stupid,

even improper—was he not capable of committing any vile action to obtain a cartoon on the third page every week? And had not Le Dave run in a great fright to beseech his dear, kind friend to assist him in keeping his misadventure silent? Le Vigreux enjoyed an unqualified pleasure to see him now sitting, imposing and upright, beside Mme. Hottmann, casting glances down her fat, round back, as if he had not been caught the day before yesterday in a compromising situation at Laquet's. Who had made, if it were not he, Vapaille's reputation—Vapaille who was leading advocate at the Courts and special counsel of the criminal classes?

And if Hottmann had not dared to put in an appearance that evening, it was, he knew very well, because he could not brave the man who, if he did not fork out and come down with the three hundred thousand francs exacted, would begin the very next day on the front page of *La Vie*, a campaign of discredit, in which the actual director of The Four Seasons would founder both in honour and in wealth. Le Vigreux had kept back these shameful revelations, these stabs, up to the present from consideration for Raymonde and regard for Brevier who, besides, were out of it, but who, however, might be incidentally affected by them. But business was business, and he had just given Isaac Hottmann his ultimatum, less perhaps in this case from an inclination to blackmail and love of money as from a personal grudge, an animosity roused by the arrogance of this "dirty Jew," as he called him, although his own Semitic origin was not the less certain.

Le Vigreux at this moment was also enjoying himself in all his pride, but in a different way from Mme. Brevier (who, by-the-bye, he remarked, was looking very beautiful), for appearance was nothing to him; it was crude realities that he delighted in with the strong appetite of a devourer of men. And it was with the smile of a Nero that he occasionally raised his eyes to the broad-faced Louis XIV. clock of sculptured wood and old-gold inlaid ornaments. Hottmann had until midnight sharp to make his decision. He revelled in the despairing rage of his absent victim, and recapitulated his grievances against him. For instance, the pretty actress of the Vaudeville Theatre, whom Hottmann a year ago had enticed away from him; secondly, his refusal to renew the advertising contract of The Four Seasons with *La Vie*; his repeated spiteful remarks, those Parisian sayings which remain in the wound like the sting of a wasp. He, Le Vigreux, had often strangled a man for less than all that! He rejoiced in the diplomacy with which he had procured compromising papers and letters, documents bought or re-copied, for he had his secret police, and always found men ready to be bribed. He saw in his mind's eye the effect of to-morrow's number, the head-lines in big print, the waves of scandal released by the sudden splash of this new sensation.

At the same time he enjoyed the feeling of being so close to Raymonde that he could easily have encircled her waist with his arm. If any remorse on her account was mingled with his savage delight in dishonouring Hottmann, or making him pay up, he told himself that there

would always be time to disarm; but Hottmann was a prey of too much importance to let slip.

La Vie had entered upon too many campaigns to stop short when it was to the profit of the newspaper! He did not stand upon such trifles, and besides, he was not one of those who take women into their confidence. Thus, if it were necessary, he would convince Raymonde that since Hottmann had rendered such revelations inevitable, it was much better that he, Le Vigreux—her father's friend and a friend of The Four Seasons—should bring him to book than any other press rival hired to ruin the enterprise.

Probably he might have been inclined to exercise clemency if he had known of Brevier's secret terrors; but not for one moment had the idea entered his mind that the latter's downfall might be associated with any disaster to Hottmann. He believed with everybody else that Brevier was a millionaire, and that his wealth, as secured as his honour, was irreproachable. Moreover, he was no psychologist. His aim limited his vision, and he was determined to ruin Hottmann; nothing should prevail against that. In conclusion, he calculated that "the Jew" would fork out and continue to do so with every fresh intimidation. He intended to pluck him feather by feather. Whether the law some day would dare to interfere with him he would not admit from pride, as he thought he could escape the consequences, and was very certain that, in case of accident, a thousand self-interested influences would form a coalition to save him.

He turned smilingly towards Raymonde.

Dazzling in her beauty, and stripped to her bosom, which scarcely seemed confined by her bodice, with only a ribbon over the shoulder, she radiated in all the splendour of her young, smooth flesh, perfumed and ripe like a wonderful fruit. Her gown scarcely appeared fastened, by a miracle of grace in its immodesty, and it seemed as if one would only have to loosen the folds of snow-white silk, and she would emerge naked like Venus from the shell, as in the picture, a copy of which ornamented the frescoed panel between the two Renaissance sideboards. She was tasting at the end of her tiny inlaid gold spoon a sherbet of cherry brandy, and affected a greedy little grimace which delighted Le Vigreux in his sensual admiration.

"Look at Gilles!" she whispered, in an amused tone of voice.

M. d'Arbelles, whose face bore a greenish hue, appeared as if he were suffering from toothache owing to the contact of the ice-cold sherbet. Then, too, the close proximity of his wife to Le Vigreux, and their evident intimacy, was causing him an insupportable pain. His avarice also pricked him, as he was disappointed at the detective's (Trochart's) first report. To have disbursed a total of forty francs, which was the cost for a day's tracking of her, in addition to thirteen francs fifty-five centimes for cabs, drinks, and a janitor; it was an awful price, deuce take it all, for hearing that Raymonde had paid three visits, eaten two strawberry tartlets, drunk a cup of chocolate at the Ritz, and had dismissed her motor in the rue des Mathurins at a house from which she had not come out again (but there were two entrances, so

they were assured—and besides, he knew it was her corset-maker who lived there). But who would prove to him that Raymonde, in her cunning, was not on her guard to prevent his knowing all she did? Trochart, who had followed her himself at the risk of taking pneumonia—he was a big, paternal-looking man, with the subtle movements of a bear, mysterious ways, and a muffled voice—agreed that madame must be on her guard, as she looked a good deal round about her. To-day, Mme. Trochart herself had been tracking Le Vigreux. Would she be more fortunate?

"This might last some months," Trochart hinted with a discreet malice in his eyes, under their big puffy eyelids.

Gilles only found some diversion from his bitter feelings in studying the gold-bordered menu in front of him. After the capons of Bresse, dressed with huge truffes whose penetrating aroma still pervaded the room, snipe's liver with salad was going to be served, from which he would abstain, in order to partake of the *chaud-froid* instead. Whilst swallowing his champagne, caressing to the palate and warming to the stomach, he noticed that he, with Michel Lorin and one or two unimportant guests, was the only one who did not wear either riband or rosette. Why was it that Brevier and Raymonde, with their splendid connections, had not helped him to become decorated? Surely it was his due.

Prosper was whispering to him in an encouraging tone "a little more champagne?" Gilles acquiesced. The old butler was saying to himself

—for he always flavoured his waiting with certain personal reflections—"Drink away, you stupid fellow, you are not enjoying yourself one little bit." And then, imperturbably, he inquired of Mme. Mascarnes, "Champagne?" whilst carrying on his monologue to himself, "That's very bad for your congestion, you huge woman!"

Conversation had gradually warmed up with the excellence of the meal; laughter and gay exclamations burst forth. Pleasure lighted up the countenances, with the exception of Trac, who was condemned, by inclination and his profession, to a mournful abstemiousness.

Nearly all there flattered themselves at being present in such excellent company. Amidst these luxurious surroundings and this conventional talk, fascinated by the wealth with which they imagined the house was full, nearly all of them experienced a delicate and superior enjoyment as if they themselves were becoming richer—even to the bohemian Mascarnes, and the poverty-stricken Trac, who lived on the credit of his butcher and grocer three parts of the year. To be present and partaking of the same dishes as an ambassador and a cabinet minister, they felt themselves powerful and fortunate, so blinded were these people by the illusion of vanity, stronger than everything else.

Mme. de Boyséon, feigning a particular interest, was drawing from Brevier some picturesque details about *The Four Seasons*. She exclaimed—

"Do you really manufacture as many as three hundred million patterns?"

"Yes; nine machines without stopping cut out more than thirty thousand little squares every hour."

"Is very much stolen?"

"About a thousand persons every year are arrested. We try to avoid the police. A search through their houses allows the inspectors to recover the great majority of the stolen goods."

"But they must have pockets expressly made for that under their skirt."

Brevier smiled. "They are bags. Do you know what we call them, kangaroos?"

"My new motor?" the marquis Tolo, whose wrinkled eyes alone smiled in his impassive face, was saying. "Oh yes, I am very satisfied with it."

And he particularized the perfection of the brakes, and the coupling-box, and went on to relate how on his first drive he had hit against a calf, and how the motor had no more felt the shock of it than if it had been a butterfly!

"As for me," declared Aunt Eloi, "I forbid my chauffeur to run more than ten miles an hour. It makes the fellow mad with despair, but he can take or leave it, as he likes. Besides, Kiki hates to go so quick."

Kiki was her dog, a little snarling lap-dog, the only creature she loved, and loved to distraction.

Roy-Chancel, a fair and handsome man, asked news of it and related some extraordinary anecdotes as to a dog's intelligence. But Mme. Eloi Le Martin only listened to him with a dissatisfied expression on her face, firstly because she regarded him as a good deal of a fool, and, secondly, because from the height of her millions she usually felt only a scarcely veiled contempt for those who dared to address her. Contrary to the majority of the women present, who abstained almost entirely from

eating and drinking, one from pastry, another from vegetables, for dietetic reasons, she devoured everything with every tooth of her new artificial set and looked with an air of defiance at Dr. Le Dave, who advised fasting for others whilst stuffing himself with little peas *au velouté*.

Michel Lorin, who was drinking bumper after bumper of water because the room was so warm and every mouthful seemed to stick in his throat, watched her puffy Jezebel's face with horror. He was imagining Aunt Eloï without her wig, and her flesh sinking down as soon as she was freed from the rigid restrictions of her dress and corsets. With a sarcastic abhorrence, he admired in her the spell of the gold which, however much soiled and vitiated and smelling of the mire and of blood, yet throws a corrupt disturbance into the souls of the best of men, excites the ferment of bitter envy and opens their mind to criminal desires.

As long as her uncertain temper had kept her at loggerheads with the Breviers, when they were living modestly, and she kept them at a distance, as people of no account, with what clearsightedness, he thought, had her niece Jeanne and the rest of them condemned her as hard, false and avaricious. Mortifications and ill-will combined, with what severe strictures they recalled her husband's malpractices, his deals on the Bourse, sowing ruin and despair, his reckless speculations. They did not scruple to call him a thief and to load with opprobrium the millions administered by Aunt Eloï after his death. And when the latter, changing round like a weather-cock, at the risk of being laughed at, sought a reconciliation with her niece and nephew

now wealthy themselves, all rancour and obloquy had ceased between them. Old and pathetic memories were resurrected at the right moment, and the extravagant fondness of Aunt Eloi for Raymonde—eclipsed since, but then accompanied with beautiful presents—had materially modified their opinion in regard to her. In the best of faith, as good as at the time when they disparaged her, these excellent Breviers now fêted her, and also Kiki, whom they presented with special cakes bought in the rue Chaussée d'Antin. After all, their aunt was not responsible for the thieving propensities of that rascally Eloi who, at bottom, wasn't such a bad sort! He had been indulgent to the hobbies of his despot of a wife, forestalling her caprices, and they forced themselves to discover his merits, influenced, without being aware of it, by the bait of the huge inheritance which they expected, in the most natural way in the world, without any sordid cupidity, and as good parents, would come to their daughters in the future.

"But she won't die," thought Michel. "She has no particular disease. Of all these people seated round this table she may probably be the last to disappear. And of what use is she? How much good could be done with the money that she heaps up under her like the toad that sits upon the treasure in the cave. How can she, that mass of deformed flesh with her hideous soul, belong by race and ancestry to a being as exquisite as Alice?" And he made a great effort not to look in the direction of the young girl.

CHAPTER VI

ALICE was wearing a white embroidered *crêpe de Chine* dress. Her white skin, her singularly deep-blue eyes which looked darker still at certain times, her light-brown hair, all her vivid young beauty conveyed an impression of extraordinary freshness.

Whilst resembling her mother and Raymonde in certain characteristics, she seemed made of finer materials, and one felt her to be of another race. In comparison with the studied expressions and artificial smiles of the other women, the look of loyalty which breathed from her face offered a delightful and restful surprise. There was nothing bitter or factitious in her appearance, only the self-controlled strength of a generously endowed nature which, though not being able to show itself entirely, yet does not stoop to disguise itself. There was something serious and noble about her which bore witness to the possession of a reflective and thoughtful mind carrying on an invisible struggle against discordant surroundings.

She also avoided bestowing on Michel the slightest attention, but, in spite of herself, her glances now and then rested on the young man, and she was only impressed by a feeling of uneasiness and regret. The misunderstanding between them still persisted and had been aggravated by a little

scene between them before dinner. Delighted at seeing him, she had held out her hand with a friendly gesture, and she still felt the disappointing touch of Michel's ice-cold fingers which, worse than hostile, were indifferent. Accustomed to controlling her quick sensitiveness, she had adopted that air of simple dignity that he often interpreted as a mark of haughtiness, for such were the complex emotions of their nervous dispositions that they could scarcely come into contact without a feeling of mutual offence and shrinking from one another like wounded sensitive plants.

Conscious of having done nothing with which to reproach herself, and surprised at finding her good intentions misconstrued, she suffered in silence, and whilst forcing herself to smile and speak with some unimportant guests, he managed to bar her passage in a corner of the drawing-room.

"I must thank you for interesting yourself in my future; yes, I refer to that position . . . which I cannot . . . which it does not suit me to accept."

And he tasted a cruel pleasure in watching the light die out from that beautiful face which had spread over it when he first spoke to her. He added roughly—

"But it is your future, yours, which matters this evening. You would do well to think about it. Receive my congratulations upon your choice; it is a fortunate one."

She had blushed, and without replying had turned away. Indignant and heart-sore, she had not been able to think of anything else during the beginning of dinner. How miserable it was that they were never able to understand one another!

Why did Michel refuse to take Le Dave's place at the hospital and children's home? She confessed to herself that the hope of meeting him every day on the common ground of doing good—for she gave up her mornings to voluntary acts of superintending and nursing the sick—yes, that hope especially, had dictated the step she had taken when she had persuaded her father to appeal to him. However haunting it might be, she banished the notion that Michel might be proud or ungrateful. Let that pass. But what right had he to be so unmannerly with her? This injustice shook her. Already her mother disliked to see her devoting herself to these charitable duties, which she deemed little compatible with their high social position. Michel's defection left her still weaker and more lonely, and the discouragement of her life came back to her.

She glanced at her sister, who seemed to bloom with the very happiness of living, looking round the table with an expression full of assurance, and exposing her beautiful neck for every one's admiration. However, it was not a satisfaction of that kind which she envied her, especially when that poor Gilles had such a morose look on his face. She turned her eyes to her mother, who appeared all pride and authority, and brought her thoughts tenderly to bear upon her father. An instinct warned her that he was suffering—was feeling aged and sad. She alone, in that house, worried herself that he never rested—that he made money and spent it freely. Poor father! Neither did he appear happy! No, it was not possible, in her opinion, that this hollow life could be the true,

the healthy, the best one. The bold expression that she discerned on Le Vigreux's face, looking so familiarly at Raymonde, wounded her maiden soul as much as if he had been looking at her in the same way; and it was not the first time that she had experienced this indefinable but tenacious pain, for she loved Raymonde, and would have liked always to approve of her. Her filial modesty was hurt by seeing her mother rival in youthfulness women who were fifteen years her junior, although she was accustomed to seeing Mme. Brevier's beautiful shoulders every evening.

For the hundredth—the thousandth—time she felt herself stifled in these surroundings, whose incongruities shocked her, in which her real tastes, her intellectual needs, could not find satisfaction, and where she was obliged to share the life of others and breathe an atmosphere uncongenial to her. Her thoughts turned to her friend Florence, who lived as she pleased, and was preparing, all alone in Paris, for her examination of Master of Arts, just as a mental discipline, for nothing compelled her to do it. But Miss Smollett was English, and therefore free. That which surprised no one, coming from her, would have been deemed shocking in Alice, who was obliged, like all young French girls, to live under the authority of her parents until she came under that of her husband. She pictured again their return in the tram, after the lecture at the Collège de France, her friend's kind smile, the charm of her clear voice, and the piquancy of her accent, always ready to comfort her again. She recalled the fact that this friendship had caused jealousy, and that it had only been

tolerated because Miss Smollett, who, in addition to her correct English manners, possessed plenty of money—the talisman which opens every door. Without Florence her solitude would have been impossible to bear. Who else had she to confide in? Her mother's and her sister's habits were so different from hers. Her dear father, so tender-hearted, scarcely perceived her at meal-times; and the only being towards whom her confidence would have run with delight—Michel—treated her either teasingly or roughly, and never was he that true, good Michel, whom she had seen leaning over the bedside of his patients with grave compassion in his glance and bending thoughtfully over his chemical experiments. If she asked his advice about her reading, he excused himself in an ironical tone. If she appealed to his knowledge, he only answered vaguely and quickly. If she shared his opinions, she divined that he withdrew within himself. Even their constrained silences prolonged uneasily the unavoidable shock of speech. Her ear still sounded with the insulting compliments he had sneeringly paid her just now about this marriage and her "fortunate" choice!

And how did he know whether this choice were a fortunate one or not? At any rate, M. Boyséon had never pained, wounded, humiliated her. During the three months that she had met him casually in society, he had never left her with any other impression (doubtless a deceptive one, but she had the curiosity of the unknown) excepting a favourable one. At this very moment, when Michel was feigning a contemptuous indifference, the young officer was surrounding her with courteous and

respectful attentions. If, at first, he had rather displeased her for being conceited, she admitted that he showed to advantage in his sober black dress suit with his thin, dark profile, clear-cut like a medallion, his sallow complexion and look of haughty languor.

He told her anecdotes in terms that thrilled a young girl's imagination; spoke of his voyages, of colonial Africa, the wilderness, village huts, fever-camps, rifle shots at the natives, who were just like monkeys. He had also been in garrison in Chinese India, and described rice plantations, pagodas; the swarming yellow populace glowed in Alice's brain with a phantasmal life. She was full of admiration for this existence outside the narrow conventionalities of Europe. She would have liked such journeyings, and it seemed to her that the dangers would not have frightened her by the side of a trustworthy companion.

She was suddenly astonished to find that she was taking pleasure in his conversation. She felt won over by that charm of manner which is composed equally of an assured timidity and suppressed boldness, a charm which possessed invisible antennæ to penetrate feminine sensibilities. Through his mother's representations he had only at first been drawn to Alice by her dowry; now he was discovering in the young girl that personal character, attractive and proud, which he had not observed in others. His vanity was at stake, and he put himself out to please.

Michel, at the further end of the table, had a very distinct sensation of the danger which threatened him. Knowing that Alice was no flirt,

the liveliness of her physiognomy could only be attributed to the sincere interest her neighbour was inspiring in her. He could not deny Boyséon's redoubtable prestige, and he envied him his good looks, although he found them antipathetic. Michel, wrongly enough, had always believed himself to be plain, and, as a youth, had cruelly suffered from this besetting idea. A smile that Alice gave Boyséon and all the tacit sympathy which he thought he saw in it suddenly exasperated him, and he wanted to call out loud to the officer—

“I forbid you to look at her in the way you are doing.”

A wild jealousy blinded him. Seeing red, he was tempted to grasp a carving knife and throw himself upon his rival. As soon as conceived the foolish madness of such an action cooled him down. Was he still so near to the brute? The fury of primitive man flushed his brain that centuries of civilization had refined in vain! . . .

Turning towards his neighbour on the right, Mme. Le Vigreux, he detected upon her face the rapid poignant expression which she was directing at her husband and Raymonde. He understood that neglected and betrayed wife, living her incessant and ever-renewed martyrdom. He respected her grief, and addressing himself to his neighbour on the left, a very pretty, red-haired divorcée, he began to talk sufficiently loud to be heard by Alice. At first, astonished, the latter believed he wished to excite her jealousy, and this indirect attention was almost pleasant to her. But Michel, too wanting in subtlety not to appear sincere, even if he were only acting the part, was displaying

a manner so disquieting in its assurance, that her wounded vanity threw her back upon Boyséon, whose masculine charm appealed to her more than she cared to acknowledge. Michel, outraged at this, redoubled his attentions to his neighbour, whom he overwhelmed with the compliments to which few women are insensible.

These manœuvres lasted until the moment when Mme. Brevier, having made a slight sign to her husband, rose from the table. Alice and Michel looked at each other like enemies, and whilst he offered his arm to Mme. Le Vigreux, the young girl passed gravely before him on the arm of Boyséon in the slow and ceremonious procession which unconsciously evoked one more solemn still, where the great organs pealed and the halberds of the Swiss vergers, in uniform, beat time to them!

CHAPTER VII

SEVERAL friends of the family were waiting in the salon, and, amongst them, Laroze, ex-associate of the Comédie-Française, whose wild pranks at the Vaudeville theatre kept society and the newspaper press always on the alert. His smooth clean-shaven face was modelled on vigorous lines; his looks and smiles were in the best style of the Regency, and his whole person, sufficiently well developed for the principal parts, expressed, even to the dignity with which he carried his abdominal rotundity, a perfect satisfaction with himself. He had formerly given lessons in elocution to Raymond, who was very talented, and to Alice, who was too self-conscious, but whose articulation was clear. He was to be consulted that evening about a play for amateurs, which there was a question of producing, or, perhaps, a pantomime. They had not yet decided which.

Dr. Le Dave, arranging his few pomaded locks of hair, threw over the group of women the look of a pasha in his harem. Did he not know the secrets of this collection of choice spirits, secrets of the body as well as of the soul? How few there were amongst them who had not taken him for their confessor?

Mascarnes looked with complacency at the

pianoforte, to which presently he would be dragged with the words—

"Now, dear master, let us have the finale of *Terpsichore*."

Trac, with a sly smile on his face, was making a note of Mme. Hottmann's hook nose and Mme. Leloup d'Ygré's shoulders—which had the stiffness of a wooden portmanteau—in order to reproduce them in his note-book. Coffee was served, the guests fell into groups, and the determined smokers slipped away.

Raymonde, who was lighting a cigarette at her husband's cigar—Gilles had approached her expressly for that purpose—heard him murmur, quite white with ill-suppressed anger—

"Be careful, your manners this evening displease me immensely."

She turned on her heel, replying, "What do I care?"

D'Arbelles had only just time to call up a smile to greet the dark-haired Mme. Roy-Chancel, who, by a quick movement, placed herself in front of him holding a glass of liqueur, saying—

"A little chartreuse, M. d'Arbelles?"

He accepted it, bowing, and went across to pay his respects to Morande, who, closely surrounded, was holding forth on the approaching elections.

During this time, Raymonde, quite quietly, rejoined Le Vigreux at the further end of the saloons, in the small conservatory where he was expecting her after having plunged it in darkness by switching off the electric light.

"Are you there, dear friend?"

"Yes, I was expecting you every minute."

He seized her hands, and with a gentle force, drew her upon the divan where he had been seated. They touched one another; with one arm he encircled her waist, and pressed a long, tender, and ardent kiss on the rounded nape of her neck where the little golden curls nestled.

"Mark, that is enough. . . . Somebody is coming."

She disengaged herself, feeling confused. He still held her close to him.

"Listen! I cannot endure this suffering. I must see, I must speak to you."

"But you do see me, speak to me, even write to me. . . ." she added, with a tender coquetry.

"Raymonde, take pity on me, keep your promise and come to-morrow."

She knew the place he meant, a small apartment in the Rue du Général Foy; a gem of a flat, thickly carpeted and softly curtained, filled with antique furniture and exquisite flowers. Only once had she been there, and had come away with her honour. But, ever since then, Le Vigreux's passion had grown impetuous. The certainty of the danger attracted her at the same time that it kept her away. She would not yield to him, yet; she did not even know whether she would ever do so. Well, perhaps, some day. But to feel herself loved with such ardour was so delicious that, by instinct, she prolonged its voluptuous and keen sensation. He begged her—

"Promise me to come to-morrow at five o'clock?"

"Very well . . . 'yes . . .'"

Then he stammered, "Oh, how kind you are!"

And, as she was rising, she was obliged to sit

down again—detained by force. His mouth determinedly sought her lips, which she had no time to turn away. Almost fainting, she felt that her promise was sealed with the most vibrating, the most mutual of contacts.

As she was slipping away like a white shadow towards the brilliantly lighted rooms, Le Vigreux, with a somewhat trembling hand, switched on the electric lights again in the conservatory, and consulted his watch. To-morrow appeared dazzling to him, for he was not only striking to death his enemy, Hottmann, but Raymonde, the woman he loved, would be coming to him.

In the meanwhile, Michel, uneasy at the apparent despondency of Brevier, who was seated in a corner of the library conversing with the Marquis Tolo, was getting ready to interrupt their talk when Alice came up to him, and said in a lowered voice—

“Would you be kind enough, Michel, to answer the telephone? ‘It’s the second time that M. Hottmann insists upon speaking to papa.”

But Brevier had heard the words, and jumped to his feet. Profiting from the fact that Mme. de Boyséon, with her razor-like face, was coming in their direction whilst making an inventory of the tall flat bureau inlaid with satin wood and gilded bronze—a miracle worthy of the Louvre!—he said to the ambassador—

“Kindly show Madame Boyséon my collection of old china which you appreciate so much.”

—So saying, he made his way towards a small room, which he called his den, where he withdrew when he felt tired. It was a place furnished with old familiar things; rubbish collected from his

former simple life, just a quiet corner where he felt rested after the surrounding luxury.

Unhooking the receiver and raising it to his ear, he leant over the machine.

"Is this you, Hottmann? Yes, I am here, and quite alone. You want to tell me something? What's the matter?"

Unconsciously his voice lost nerve, changed, became an echo of Hottmann's, which was so altered that it seemed, as he leaned on the little slab, like that of an unknown Hottmann. Ah! what a trouble he had to breathe! This agony at his heart—all his evil presentiments. He continued—

"Do you hear me? I am asking you what is the matter? Are you ill? Why didn't you come to dinner?"

Then the invisible but present voice—distant and strange—replied—

"Is Le Vigreux there?"

"Yes, why? Do you want to speak to him?"

A burst of sardonic laughter sounded in the now thoroughly frightened Brevier's ears, and the voiced answered back—

"He is a thorough blackguard; but it is all the same to me. I shall not read *La Vie* to-morrow morning."

"Why not?"

Again the little sinister laugh sounded. "I pay my respects to everybody. Hello! Do you hear me? I am saying good-bye to you, Brevier."

Was Hottmann going mad? He thought he saw him standing there, with his sallow, owl-like face, grimacing and ravaged. He stammered—

"What . . . what? . . . Are you going away?"

"Yes; I am going to kill myself in a minute or two—you ask me why? You will know the reason why, soon enough."

"The Four Seasons. Hottmann! No! It can't be that! Good God!"

"Yes! The crash has come, and it is a fine—a splendid—crash! Everything's going with it, I, you, Roy-Chancel. Ah! ah! extremely sorry, my friend, very sorry—but there it is! No Hottmann any more! It's finished; good-bye!"

"Hello, Hottmann, answer me, I beg!"

Silence only. With features distorted, haggard, profusely perspiring, Brevier shouted—

"Come, Hottmann, this is a joke! Will you answer me, you scoundrel?"

Still nothing! He rang, he called in vain with an ever-increasing anger, an unfathomable despair. He had seized hold of the machine as if to break it; was clinging to it like a drowning man, when Michel, frightened by the shouting voice, appeared.

"What's the matter, guardian? They will hear you."

"Ah! my boy!"

Brevier fell back into an armchair, then sat up suddenly with his hand at his collar as though he were suffocating—

"Run to Hottmann's place, get there quickly. . . . He says he going to commit suicide. . . . It is impossible; no, I'll go with you. I'll go, too. . . ."

— In his trouble he reached out for his hat, which he could not find. His legs gave way under him, and he once more fell back on the chair with a movement of helplessness

"I cannot; you go alone—don't let anybody suspect. Go by the servants' staircase; but be quick."

He uttered an impatient oath. When he was alone he cast a stupefied glance at the little time-piece, then at the silent telephone, the mended books on the shelves, worn with use. A pastel of his wife smiled at him from the wall between the photographs of Raymonde and Alice. These were his life; the sole reason of all his struggles, of the stupendous work he had built up, and which was now toppling over. He could not believe it . . .

He still heard Hottmann's voice vibrating on the drum of his ear, tearing his heart. No, it was a ridiculous nightmare; the thing wasn't possible! What did he mean about Le Vigreux? And about The Four Seasons? He himself ought to have gone . . . what if he ran there now? Never could he support this suspense. But, however atrocious it was, still he felt that it was a kind of respite, the minute of hope, of doubt, which is left even to those condemned to death. By-the-by, what was it all about? The crash? The crash . . .

This terrible word, with heart-rending tumult, the din of ruin, reverberated in his brain. Hottmann was not committing suicide for no reason, even if a newspaper did attack him for purposes of blackmail or threats. It must be that he had been brought to bay by some catastrophe, dishonour, punishable responsibilities. He must have gambled on the Bourse, lost millions entrusted to his honour. And what about the other one, the unfortunate Roy-Chancel, who had no suspicion . . . ?

"But I myself, I lose everything too! My own

fortune and my family's Poverty for them tomorrow! And I am too old to begin all over again! Poverty for those who have a horror of it . . . and then the publicity, the scandal, the shame!"

Mechanically he drew towards him a decanter of water and a tumbler. "It seemed as though he had a threshing machine in his head, and then there was that increasing suffocation, those stabbing pains. Ah! well! A good short illness would soon free him from all that. One doesn't suffer any more when one's dead! But his wife, his two daughters! He was endeavouring all the time to get his thoughts away, but they returned unceasingly to his womenkind. He remembered the pearl bracelet he had just bought for his wife, and also recalled the promise he had made to remit Gilles a cheque for twenty thousand francs. He murmured to himself, "It's very strange!"

Never would Jeanne or Raymonde put up with poverty. And Alice, still innocent, what a sad future for her! This idea completely crushed him. He struggled like a wrestler overcome, and stretched out his clenched fist. Should he allow himself to be felled down without putting up a fight? He must see, must know! Perhaps the situation was not so desperate after all. But was such trust as his credible? How could he have put into Hottmann's fraudulent hands not only all that belonged to himself, and even money that didn't rightly belong to him, but what remained of Gilles' patrimony? He could split his head against the wall, thrice fool, old imbecile that he was! And Michel didn't return. However, he must give him

time. From here to the Hottmanns' residence in the Champs Elysées and back . . . but supposing Hottmann had lied . . . he, kill himself?

Probably he was driving at that moment to the *Gare du Nord* on his way to Belgium, the refuge for all such. But, if he only knew! It was a stupid mystery, and he would have the explanation of it very soon . . . supposing it was nothing after all . . . He heaved a sigh of relief at this foolish thought.

"Are you ill, father dear?"

Alice, having felt uneasy, appeared in the doorway, and, seeing him all upset, rushed forwards.

"It's nothing, my darling. . . . I felt a little giddy from the heat in there. I am getting along all right now."

She handed him a bottle of smelling salts.

"No, it's not necessary, I assure you. And to give you a proof, I am coming with you——"

Without becoming insane he could not remain any longer in this solitude and this abandonment. However heart-rending his daughter's presence was at such a moment it gave him a bitter relief. Never had she appeared lovelier to him. He looked at her with such a profound worship in his eyes that she was moved by it as by a presentiment.

"You're not hiding anything from me, papa?"

"Of course not, child. Let us get back to our guests."

He felt inclined to shed tears, for he had just thought of the Boyséons, of the marriage so much desired by his wife, also of Raymonde's destiny with Gilles, so uncertain as it was. . . . But the most bitter thing of all was to see Jeanne Brevier

and Mme. Hottmann talking about dress together in friendly tones surrounded by a lively group and within view of Aunt Eloi, who was in the act of digesting her dinner. Yes, there was Aunt Eloi, so immensely rich! If she only would! If she were any other kind of a woman one could appeal to her family sentiments, to her good-heartedness. But she? You might as well address yourself to a brick wall; and Brevier, gazing around him, saw nobody but acquaintances, strangers, showy friends, parasites of the wealthy.

These rooms now so full of people, where every other minute men in evening dress and low-necked women with a smile on their lips entered through the folding-doors, announced by Prosper; he imagined them empty, stripped—for misfortune has no friends. He looked for Le Vigreux, but did not see him, as he had just taken his departure.

Laroze, however, was surrounded by suppliants begging him to recite one of La Fontaine's fables, in which he excelled, bestowing on twenty verses the importance of an entire drama. He begged to be excused, counting on their prayers until the moment when his tact and his vanity would not allow him to refuse any longer. Then he planted himself before the mantelpiece, ran his eyes over the brilliant assembly, assured himself that the cabinet minister was listening, and began—

“LE LOUP ET L'AGNEAU.

“Un agneau se désaltérait
Dans le courant d'une onde pure.”

Brevier, blinking his eyes, listened in a sort of

childish stupor. He once more saw himself a little boy, reciting this fable to his parents in their humble dwelling-place, smelling of salt-water fish; brown nets were hanging from the ceiling, and their fish-soup was cooking on the hearth. The noises of the old port of Marseilles were heard outside, hogsheads being rolled along, sacks unloaded, the clapping of oars in the thick green waters.

He was drawn from this torpor by the applause, exclamations of rapture, and discreet cheers, which Laroze acknowledged smilingly yet haughtily. Now it was Mascarnes who was being sought. For form's sake he also excused himself.

"Let us have the finale of Terpsichore, dear Master!"

Chords resounded, firmly attacked, causing a revulsion in Brevier's fibres.

"No," he said to himself; "it isn't possible."

And now he wished that Michel would not return, but immediately after, this uncertainty became a torture. He looked at Roy-Chancel's self-satisfied countenance as he stroked his blonde beard, and also at the smooth skin, fat shoulders, and happy appearance of Mme. Hottmann, who was little suspecting that at this very moment perhaps. . . . He remarked that, behind her fan, Jeanne was suppressing a yawn. To be sure, this music was rasping, and yet very soon all of them would be expressing their ecstasies.

The falseness of this frivolous life made him feel sick. How stupid it all was! A man slaves, grows old, dies, for what? For the foolish amusement of a set of snobs. In contrast he saw a

little country house hidden in a wood of fir-trees fronting a deep blue sea, with a dazzling sky overhead, a retreat for the wise of the earth! But, suddenly, Michel was standing there, having entered quietly and looking at him. He didn't wear an agitated appearance, and seemed even calm.

Brevier rejoined him in the boudoir hung with mirrors.

"What news?"

Feeling the misery of the news that he brought, and with a poignant regret at not being able to lessen it, Michel murmured the words, "Hottmann has poisoned himself."

"No!"

"He had just swallowed some pills of crystalized aconite and died in less than three minutes. There was nothing to be done."

Then it was all too true! The downfall, the ruin, the immense waves had broken over the rocks on which the vessel founders.

The thing that followed was frightful. Brevier extended his arms. An unutterable pain and fearful spasm nearly strangled him. His face bore the suffocated look of a man caught in a landslip and lying under an enormous stone. Both mouth and eyes were opened immoderately. Unable to move, paralyzed from head to foot, he felt, whilst still quite conscious, his life fleeing from his body.

Michel seized him with open arms. He called out, cries were uttered, the piano stopped, and women in tears rushed about. Brevier had just died, seized by a fatal attack of angina pectoris.

SECOND PART

VIRTUES are lost in self-interest as rivers are lost in the ocean.
LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

CHAPTER I

THE organs were pealing forth their sonorous lamentations. The nave, plunged in the shadow, was draped in black cloth bordered with silver, the sepulchral sadness of which contrasted with the mysterious light filtering through the stained-glass window-panes. The enormous catafalco was hidden by flowers, and surrounding it, rows upon rows of wax candles diffused their ardent flame. And in the midst of this throng of people pressed shoulder to shoulder, men on one side, women on the other, to the sound of the deep bass voices of the choir, the body of Brevier, lost beneath the pompous and embroidered pall, in its narrow oaken box with its nickel screws, was lying for all eternity.

A dark group, motionless, and as though lost in a grief too deep for thought, occupied the seats, whose coverings were suitable for the occasion, set apart for mourners near the high altar, and at a signal from the master of the funeral ceremonies rose up and sat down as the service required. The family were seated here.

The front rows of those immediately behind could observe their pathetic outlines. Firstly, Mme. Brevier, who had insisted on being present at any cost, all trembling and almost swallowed

up in her mourning habiliments, standing between Raymonde and Alice, with the huge aunt Eloi le Martin, accompanied by her lady companion, Mdle Duverset, behind. There were numerous unknown relations. A cousin from Toulon, dressed like a sea-captain, and a soldier from St. Cyr, both of whom attracted attention because of the contrast of their uniforms with the sombre garb of M. d'Arbelles and M. Michel Lorin. Roy-Chancel of a waxen pallor, who the previous day had been present at Hottmann's burial, represented The Four Seasons with all the members of the Committee.

In a row by themselves, looking a very respectable couple, were seated Prosper and his wife—white-haired faithful retainers—with their niece Rose, who was weeping and blowing her nose.

It had been found necessary to put up barriers in anticipation of a big crowd, for new-comers were constantly arriving, creeping up the aisles or passing by way of the chancel, after having placed their signatures on the detached sheets of paper placed on the tables situated by the draughty doors.

Women dipped their fingers in the holy water. Many of the people present had come from curiosity; some of them were unknown poor creatures, and others dressmakers on the look-out for the last fashions, self-styled reporters, and a gaping crowd of nondescripts, who interfered with those employed in regulating the obsequies. They nodded signs to one another, like the directors of a gambling-hell where people play for the biggest stake. In spite of a few hitches

—for instance, the Princess Sophia who, arriving late with her maid of honour, almost failed to find a seat—everything passed off extremely well. If it had been left to the wishes of Alice and Michel all Paris would not have been invited to the funeral, for they suffered from exhibiting their grief to an indifferent throng of people, and were offended in their filial sentiments by the ostentation of a ceremony which they would have preferred to confine to the intimacy of the family. But Mme. Brevier, Raymonde, and Gilles had thought differently.

The world to which they belonged considers it has a right to pass its verdict on sorrow and joy, death and marriage, and establishes the social customs whose transgression in these heart-rending circumstances would have constituted more than a mere breach of etiquette, a very serious blunder seeing that the sudden end of the ex-director was not only linked with that of the actual co-director of The Four Seasons, but connected with the compromised fate of the concern—for round these simultaneous catastrophes rumours were being widely circulated. The Breviers were too much in the public eye, through their name and social position, to withdraw from these hackneyed but much-valued tokens of respect that society was offering to their misfortune. Hottmann's ostentatious funeral compelled them to do as much in order to avoid invidious comparisons, especially as these two events were identified in the doubts and suspicions of the public.

That was why, amidst this heap of flowers, The Four Seasons was represented by a crown

two yards high, which four delegates bore aloft in relays. A compact crowd of men and women were recognizable by their dress and general appearance. These were the employees surrounded by the inspectors and floor-walkers, and apart by themselves were the porters in their green uniforms and the other workmen of the establishment.

Numbers of well-known faces, which their owners exhibited with the evident satisfaction of seeing and being seen, appeared in the congregation; also numerous connections and visitors at the Park Monceau residence, acquaintances of an hour. There was Morande with his ministerial colleague ogling all the pretty women, also the Marquis Tolo and the German ambassadorial Counsellor, the President's secretary, senators, deputies, academicians.

Passionate and pathetic a voice rang out from above. It was a baritone from the Opera House, and Mascarnes accompanied it. Amongst the women who listened piously, the beautiful Mme. Mérienne and some few others threw profane looks in the direction of the organ loft. Mme. de Cicé, still of a yellowish pallor from her recent operation, was exhibiting to the envious glances of her feminine neighbours an extremely beautiful jacket of sable fur, while the aged Mme. Aguilano, a celebrity in the days of the Empire, leaned over to whisper in the ear of the Princess Sophia who was somewhat deaf, and quite close to whom was standing a tall footman carrying her prayer-book.

The majority of those present exhibited a patient weariness, others a sadness assumed for

the occasion, and still others whispered amongst themselves.

Trac, Le Dave, and Vapaille, finding they were side by side, were communicating their impressions to each other.

"Is it true that Brevier also poisoned himself?" asked the barrister. "That's the rumour, you know."

Le Dave raised his eyebrows. "Why should he have done so? He had nothing to do with the other one's rascalities. Besides, *La Vie*, which is hard down upon Hottmann, is exalting the honour of our dead friend." Then he added, with the assurance of one whose diagnosis is wrong to the end: "Brevier died from a spasm of the glottis—a pure accident."

"It's not astonishing that *La Vie* exonerates him," sneered Trac; "don't you know that Le Vigreux is the lover of the golden-haired Raymonde?"

"You're quite wrong," returned Le Dave, in a shocked voice—shocked because some months previously the old beau had been repulsed by the young woman, during a consultation which had been of a somewhat lively character.

"Is he still in love with the mother?" asked Vapaille, with an evil smile.

"Oh, come!" objected Le Dave, without otherwise appearing scandalized; "everybody knows that Mme. Brevier is a good woman."

"Don't you see that the doctor has his lips sealed by professional secrecy?" said Trac, in a bantering tone. "If he only dared to say all he knows!"

The doctor thrust out his lip with an air that neither approved nor disapproved.

"In the meanwhile," continued the lawyer, "there's a house where we shan't dine any more—and what dinners they gave, too!"

"You will have a place at their table," said Trac. "There will be a complicated liquidation, lawsuits will swarm, and you will have charge."

"I have heard that they are ruined," returned Vapaille, coldly. "In that case discretion is a duty. What's your opinion, doctor?"

"Yes, yes!" answered Le Dave, in an abstracted tone, for they owed him a year and a half's fees.

Amongst other groups similar reflections were being exchanged in a tone either of indifference or malice. And yet Brevier, ever generous, had helped many of these people. That was only one reason the more why they should pay back their debt with slander and abuse.

It was indeed a splendid funeral, but not as much as Madame Brevier would have wished, who, even in her deepest grief, found a sad comfort in the thought that these honours, worthy of him and of his family, were rendered to the loyal companion of her life, to the worthy man whose inestimable price she measured—without exactly knowing why—by the funeral vanity of this great show, and by the solemn obsequies, which the newspapers on the following day would describe with every flattering expression. And whilst entertaining this frivolous conviction, at the same time so bitter, she believed she was honouring his memory and not betraying it.

Aunt Eloi, whose sight was very keen, whispered

—and Mme. Brevier looked as if she had not heard—
“The Princess has come.”

At this moment her feeling of deep grief, and the anxiety to not show openly too much or too little; the consciousness of being on view, and of conforming to the unwritten law which was known to every well-bred person, that of adopting an attitude at once sorrow-stricken but graceful; the singular faculty of thinking double that is experienced at these terrible moments, and which does not permit one moment's forgetfulness; all these considerations prevented her from abandoning herself to other disquietudes or anticipating a morrow which, she had only been vaguely allowed to divine, might contain some lamentable surprises for her.

She could not keep from thinking how painful it was to have to confer with dressmakers and milliners at such a moment, although selecting in her mind the English style of mourning and a Mary Stuart cap edged with white, which was more becoming to her. Once more her tears flowed. She perceived all she was losing, and reproached herself for not having sufficiently appreciated, supported, and made happy her brave and generous husband. When he was there she had not valued him enough. Now he was gone she estimated his worth by the immense void he had left behind. Never had there been any falling off in his untiring devotion, in his work consecrated to their welfare. These truths, which she partly began to see, tore her to pieces. Her life's support had given way beneath her. Facing her in the future was only the sadness of widowhood, with the slow horror of the gradual decline to the end.

Raymonde wept, without caring whether she reddened her eyelids and made herself look ugly. The very best of her was grief-stricken at this moment, and all her good instincts welled up from a depth of tender memories—her childhood and her girlhood replete with the petting which was given her by the only father of his kind in the world.

Who would now be able to hold her back from the slippery ways? Who would protect her from herself, from her sudden infatuations and temptations, caprices, and risky pleasures? It was on his account, in order not to give him pain, that she had remained up till then virtually a good woman. Had he not also assisted them always in their money difficulties by which she and Gilles were constantly beset?

She knew herself only too well. Riches alone would be able to keep her within the bounds of conventional right living. She would never have the strength of mind to endure poverty. And to be poor with Gilles, to descend to a rigid economy with that commonplace companion, no, it was not possible! To renounce the luxury which possessed her body and soul, that enveloped her whole being in the warmth of perfumed baths, with the exquisite contact of the finest cambric, and the bright glow of lights that heightened the brilliancy of her complexion; to be deprived of the looks in men's eyes in which she read admiration and passion, of women's jealousy, of all those pleasures of satisfied vanity which cradled her in a perpetual intoxication, never would she be able to do it!

Her grief was intensified by all these thoughts, for although she was still ignorant of the extent of

the disaster, she imagined it was serious enough to completely change their mode of life, and all the more ardently did she cherish and recall, alas, too late, the unrealized aspirations of that father who was the inexhaustible providence of his family.

Owing to the awful misfortune which had overtaken them, she felt a desire to expiate. She was bowed down under this brutal stroke of fate by the shame of her weakness and frivolity, and felt a repentance which she would have preferred to be lasting, but which she feared was only temporary, for the delicious corruption (and she knew it only too well) had eaten into her voluptuous and shrinking flesh, and her heart was athirst for enjoyment.

If only she could have loved Gilles, her good resolutions would have seemed easier. But how was it possible to revive what was dead, to restore that short and colourless honeymoon which so quickly was transformed into coldness and constant quarrels? It was not only an incompatibility of temper which unnerved her every moment, their thoughts and feelings differed in every way. Her disposition was a free and joyous one; his moody. Her liveliness continually grated on his feelings, and she was upset by his gloominess. She was open-handed, and he was close, even miserly, and only gave when it was to the advantage of his pleasure or pride.

In spite of his insupportable affectations, he was a man of the world, and of some distinction, and he never made himself so ridiculous that she was able to bend him to a humiliating servitude without revolt on his part. He aspired to be her equal and

her master, and there were constant scenes in consequence. As he was good-looking he had not at one time altogether displeased her, but now she could not look at him without dislike. The very colour of his skin, his clammy hands, his carefully tended beard, almost inspired her with repulsion. And to think that they were married—yes, married!—such strangers as they were to one another, separated from loving one another by a wall—for she did not appreciate in the slightest degree his loving her in the way that the conjugal compact authorized. Although she had her price, she possessed certain proud sentiments, and would not submit, either in marriage or out of it, to any one utterly antipathetic to her, even if he showered millions upon her.

Such, however, was her fate, minus the millions, alas! Eight days previously she had faced the dim and distant possibility of a divorce. Her father would have been there to keep difficulties at bay, to protect her, to serve as her guarantee before the world, and ensure her an enjoyable life whilst awaiting the time when she would have a new home. Her father gone, there remained only her husband's protection, and such is the social inferiority of the woman standing alone, that this protection, grasped at one day, and loathed the next, presented itself to her as the only one upon which she could rely. For she repelled, with a vestige of honour left, and with all her might, another image, whose face and name were dear to her, but which, it seemed, would be far from her, and for a long time, because of her mourning. Thus she saw herself thrust back upon her husband just at the

moment she desired the most to free herself from his guardianship.

This sharp contrast renewed her grief and her remorse, a remorse mingled with regret. She had been on the verge of committing the irreparable that evening—only a few days ago—when she promised Mark that rendezvous, a promise which had been so feverishly wrested from her. And since then, the other irreparable thing had happened, death, with all its horrors and miseries, the awful mystery which faces us all, and through which we return to our original dust. Her poor dear father! For his sake, for his memory, she would endeavour not to transgress, and to remain a good woman. And into this prayer there entered a superstitious feminine terror, with the hope of disarming towards herself the thunderbolt which had just fallen upon them. Quite sincere, for the time being, she felt suffocated by the unuttered prayers on her lips.

Alice was not grieving only on her own account. Her restrained despair nearly stifled her. What mattered to her to-morrow's unknown happenings, beside the atrocious suffering of to-day? She had only one thought, one cry: that her father, her kind and gentle friend, was lying there motionless in that narrow wooden bed, with closed lips and eyes.

He would never smile at her again with his kindly if tired smile; he would never look at her again with that irresolute expression, which manifested so much tenderness, and the mystery of things one is powerless to put into words, and are thought useless to utter. Ah! Again that eternal falsehood between those who love one another the best, that useless shrinking from speech, that

carelessness as to the spoken word! Why had she not dared more often to ask him questions, to confide in him, to try and become the friend whom, she was sure, he was in need of?

How deeply she regretted her silent and self-restrained character, her proud bashfulness! Left to herself she would have been able to understand him, but an indescribable embarrassment, caused by her respect for him, as well as a jealous feeling of reticence, had kept back her impulses for too long! Why had she not been able to guess that a disease was undermining his health, that cares were preying upon him? At least she could have contributed to his comforts by a watchful, attentive, and ever-present tenderness. Who knows if he had not doubted her, and if that noble heart, however clear-sighted it was, had not accused her also of indifference and selfishness?

Willingly she would have sacrificed the most beautiful years of her life to atone for his involuntary wrongs. Her eyes, opened at last, plunged deep into the hateful evidence. It was for her, her mother and sister, for their luxury and pleasure, that he was dead; overcome with anxieties and perhaps with sorrows, too overworked for his time of life. He had not cared for their wearisome mode of existence, and many secret grounds for anxiety had tormented him. He had remained so modest, so simple in his tastes. His straightforward character had not been the dupe of the allurements of his position.

Why had she not understood him? Rest had evidently been necessary for him, and, without doubt, it might have prolonged his life. He, one of

the best and most innocent of men, had been the victim of those absurd notions, of that low ideal of life which she felt instinctively was false and unhealthy, and whose yoke, she swore to herself, she would no longer accept. In her thirst for expiation, she reproached herself for not suffering sufficiently, and, accusing herself of ingratitude, she dedicated to the dear departed one her thoughts, full of revolt, crushed as they had been under the ever-revolving millstone of accomplished facts, and turning round in the changeless circle of odious realities.

She thought, "My father is dead and I am living. What remains of him will disappear, and I shall never see him again, never!"

CHAPTER II

It was the end—with a sign of the cross dipped in holy water, made over the casket, and a last movement of farewell being repeated from place to place. The family stood in a row and the procession began. Everybody bowed their heads low before the thickly veiled, almost unrecognizable, forms of the women, there were hand pressures, condolences offered to the men in lowered voices.

Gilles conducted the mournful proceedings with an air of sad dignity, taking note whilst they passed of the distinguished people present, whom he recalled to his mind afterwards with a quiet satisfaction. He felt himself invested with a new responsibility, which he had no intention of sharing with anyone, not even with Roy-Chancel, to whom he had already made his authority felt, or with Michel Lorin, whose filial rights he could not ignore. He had worked very hard during the past twenty-four hours, giving orders about everything, as if, after Brévier, he inherited the domestic power. He had just discreetly smiled at the director of the consulates, when he recognized, in the Indian file, which was dropping past one by one, after making the customary salutations, Le Vigreux, bowing very low in front of Raymonde. A slight flush rose to his pale cheeks. Here was one, at least, that he

would very gladly have done away with by a vigorous mental effort, or killed with a look, like the legendary basilisk.

La Vie's campaign against Hottmann, its gradual revelations, its threats or blackmailing of which he did not hold the key, filled him with anger. In spite of every precaution to the contrary, some of this scandal was bound to fall back upon Brevier, and consequently upon him, Gilles. But what dismayed him the most was to see *The Four Seasons* compromised. He prayed that his father-in-law, who never mentioned his investments, had not risked any part of his capital! That Hottmann should have speculated and lost, that ruin should be threatened, appeared unfortunately, only too true, for the employees' care-worn faces were sufficient indication of all that. His personal grievances against Le Vigreux were added to these hatreds and fears, for, in addition, this individual wanted to steal his wife. Were there no laws, no judges in France? "Ah, thief! If I dared to strike your face!" Just as he was thinking thus, Le Vigreux held out his hand, which Gilles took with a reflex and mechanical movement. Nothing could be more unpleasant to him than this touch, especially as he had given his left hand, which Le Vigreux grasped firmly, thus flattening his fingers against his ring.

Michel, aroused as from a nightmare, looked at these people filing past. He also, but with complete self-effacement, was exhausted from vigils and the funeral proceedings. In vain did he seek in this crowd one face betokening absolute friendship or faithful attachment. The best and most sympathetic amongst them were those of the honest old

foremen belonging to The Four Seasons who had struggled at Brevier's side for the prosperity of the concern. Their livelihood threatened, now that they were growing old and tired, increased their feelings of melancholy.

• Amongst this incongruous crowd of people, where all Paris was represented as at an annual picture-gallery opening, how many amongst them truly grieved at the loss of this man? Whilst they passed before the family their faces expressed a grave decorum, but, as soon as the low bows were accomplished, each one withdrew with a quickened step. Laroze, the actor, looked as profound as Hamlet. Trac wore a heart-broken smile. M. Leloup d'Ygré appeared as if he were delivering a severe sentence. . Mme. Mérienne gave that beautiful tender look of which she was so prodigal. And still they continued to file past. Was it possible the Breviers knew such a heap of people? This stream would grow smaller outside the church, it would be much thinner in the cemetery, and after the last shovelful not one of them would be left. Definite symbol! Death and ruin would create the void. It was not only of him who had passed away but of the survivors themselves that Parisian society in advance was taking its farewell.

Ruin! Michel alone, of all the family, foresaw it so complete. Through Hottmann's self-accusatory suicide and the current rumours which had put him on the scent, Brevier's too sudden death had accentuated the fact. However ill he might have been, and however unexpected the lugubrious news that Michel had been obliged to convey to him, this mortal emotion could only be explained

by the fact that his vital interests were bound up in Hottmann's person and would disappear with him.

Commissioned by Mme. Brevier, as soon as it had been found necessary to take the first steps, by a summary inventory of documents and money, Michel had discovered, in a little old cupboard in the "den," a list of intimate memoranda where, in conjunction with abbreviated notes on his health and other matters, Brevier had inscribed considerable issues of money under the transparent signs of Hot . . . or H . . . Thoroughly alarmed, Michel had sought further, and found the confirmation of these memoranda on the vouchers of his cheque-book and no trace of any entries. On the contrary, there was mention of still more considerable loans which had not been paid back, and on the fatal date these significant words: "H . . . makes me uneasy. Is he deceiving me? No, it would be too dreadful!" At that moment Gilles had opened the door and either restless or jealous had said, "Is this work pressing? We could do it together;" and he added, "Haven't you found a cheque for twenty thousand francs in my name? My father-in-law intended writing me out one the very evening. . . ." Michel replied, "I have seen nothing of the kind!"

Under Gilles' seemingly indifferent manner he had betrayed a keen disappointment. Michel had not deemed it necessary to communicate the certainty of his opinion to him. Brevier's secret belonged first of all to those who were nearest to him, and they would learn it all too soon.

One thing alone remained inexplicable to him,

namely, Le Vigreux's posthumous attack upon Hottmann. He suspected a tenacious revenge and a lengthy system of blackmail, and in this he guessed right, for Le Vigreux calculated that Roy-Chancel, in order to defend the credit of the establishment and gain time to save the business, would offer *La Vie* a big ransom, whose salutary effect would be to modify from day to day the newspaper's opinions.

Now that the scape-goat, Hottmann, was buried beneath the rubbish of an ignominious ghetto, The Four Seasons would find in *La Vie*, under the new order of things, an ally with harmless fangs and velvet paws, a powerful guarantee of rehabilitation and advertisement. Only it was necessary that Roy-Chancel, conquered, voiceless, should well understand the pressing need of paying up much and often!

Michel, who despised Le Vigreux whilst admiring his force, said to himself, "It is one of those dirty traffics again, one may be sure! But let him keep his hands off Brevier or I shall break his head for him."

He thought that the danger was not probable, as Le Vigreux had excellent reasons for continuing on good terms with Raymonde. Only yesterday she was rich and powerful, at least through her father; to-morrow she would find herself poor and defenceless. And Le Vigreux was pitiless towards the weak. . . . Well! it remained to be seen!

The procession had formed, and behind the hearse, by the side of Gilles, who made it his duty to try and get ahead of him, Michel walked with bared head. It was not the thought of this ruin which grieved him so much as the terrors which

that energetic man of action must have felt, that fighter raised to the topmost heights after a life of struggle, when he contemplated at last a gulf at his feet.

He remembered with infinite gratitude Pierre's many deeds of kindness. Once more he saw himself a little boy, affectionately received by the then modestly living family in their middle-class and economical surroundings. He had been treated as an adopted son. What emotions and what comforting memories were held of those painful years by the little orphan, shy as he had been then, as he would always remain! No, it was not this ruin which made him suffer the most. If he pitied those poor women it was on account of the man and not on account of the fortune they had lost. He had never submitted to the prestige of that fortune, and he had often hated its fateful influence. How many times it had tormented him on account of Alice's future, her moral and intellectual development, for he considered with his obstinate straightforward character, that luxury beyond a certain degree breaks the ties between human beings, envelops them in inertia and indifference towards their neighbour, and closes the pores of thought and conscience.

He knew full well how much the sensitiveness of the wealthy became blunted and over-grown with moss. Every day he beheld them slaves to their surroundings and their prejudices, deformed by a particular view of life, and a prey to diseases unknown amongst the poorer classes. Some had their blood thickened by their mode of eating and the indigestion it caused, which was treated with

drugs and systems of diet. Others had their nerves over-excited by their artificial and agitated existence. Nearly all of them were paying in some form or other for their abnormal life. Very many were suffering from unsatisfied desires of all kinds, or the still worse, satiety. Not one of them could declare himself happy!

He had no wish for riches, either for those whom he loved or for himself, unless it was to do good to others, so heavy were the obligations and responsibilities attaching to the possession of wealth. He only looked on money as a fertile source of mutual devotion and solidarity, and only recognized in rich people their right to be such for the sake of others whilst themselves living almost poor! But how exceptional were these last! He did know a few, however, and still had no desire to exchange his life with theirs, so much must they suffer from their powerlessness to relieve the widespread misery against which all their millions counted but as a drop of water in the ocean. No, it was not the Breviers' ruin which affected Michel the most.

And even if he dared to go to the full length of his thoughts, and dive into those obscure recesses where lies concealed what we will only admit uneasily to ourselves, he acknowledged that as soon as his mind dwelt upon a certain rare and lovely creature, who was already inseparable from his soul, this ruin did not appear the worst misfortune for him.

Alice dwelt inaccessible to his pride as long as she occupied the pedestal, where the position of her family placed her. Bitterly he forbade himself

from longing for her, finding the weight of her dowry too heavy, and recoiling before the shadow of a suspicion of cupidity—for he had that touchy and possessive instinct of the male which wants to feed and shelter his mate, and which prefers to take her naked in order to make sure that he is not obeying any ambitious or self-interested motive. He wanted to be for a wife the tutelary deity from which every good thing emanates; a familiar, courageous, and tender-hearted god, who claims neither servitude nor gratitude, and finds himself sufficiently well paid in loving and being loved.

Alice, impoverished, deprived of that cumbersome load of money, was no longer forbidden to his dreams and hopes. A wall had toppled over beyond which he beheld her standing free on a wide horizon, under the open sky.

But he dared not abandon himself to this uncertain joy, for he was grieving too much. His heart felt broken at following thus, through these gloomy streets, the cold remains of his benefactor—his second father. Besides, he was not convinced that the quality of his sentiments was pure enough. Before such a sorrow, how was it possible to think of other things? Was there not something unfeeling and ungrateful in doing so?

There was, however, one sinister thing about this ruin, which he himself scorned, but of which he could not underrate the seriousness. Alice was not the only one to suffer, and how could he seek a motive for consolation in an event which only brought pain and humiliation to this young girl. She was so proud, and, however great her worth, to fall from such a height deserved any one's pity.

Did he possess the selfishness to desire his own happiness through her misfortune? For if Brevier were still living, and if he had not imprudently risked all he possessed, Michel would still be the gloomy and jealous suitor who, voluntarily, had brought about his repulse the other evening by taking offence at the look exchanged between Alice and Boyséon.

By-the-by, where was Boyséon? Evidently amongst the crowd. Just now he was accompanying his mother in the march past the family. Marching past! This was perhaps what Boyséon might do, march past and not return. . . . But no! Supposing he was really in love with Alice! Why should he be incapable of doing what Michel would do with happiness? Why look upon him as a contemptible creature?

However, he experienced a strange thrill, a sensation of lightness with nothing but the possibility of this defection. And if only the other obstacle would disappear! In vain did he try to absorb himself in the sorrowful emotion of the moment. But a dim light, very feeble and shaken by the cold wind, glimmered at the end of this darkness. It was the small imperceptible flame of life, which is born out of the depths of death itself, more powerful than tears, mourning, disasters; the life which craves to live, and whose spark causes life.

CHAPTER III

ABOUT a week later the family were assembled in the library, where Gilles had installed himself since the funeral. All day he was feverishly running over the business papers, and shut himself up there in company with Mme. Brevier, the notary, Maître Labric, and the lawyer, Maître Aurandon.

These two gentlemen, the first short and stout, the other thin and tall—both of them as solemn as oracles and avoiding each other's eyes—had withdrawn a few minutes earlier with their morocco-leather portfolios under their arms, conducted by a somewhat anxious-looking and suspicious Prosper, whose ears had been glued to the doors and his eyes to the keyholes, more than is allowed for servants as perfect as he was supposed to be.

Raymonde and Alice, who had entered quietly, were seated on either side of Mme. Brevier and Gilles. Their pale faces wore a concentrated expression of anxiety. They all knew that it was not only the great loss they had to face, but that ruin was added to it. Mme. Brevier was astounded by the news. Whether it was because their youth offered greater resistance, and that they looked forward to the future with fewer reasons for despair, her daughters had learnt of this calamity—Raymonde with an outburst of tears followed

by an air of resolve, Alice with a kind of fatalistic indifference. They accepted the accomplished fact, of which perhaps they had not realized all the cruel consequences, their life until then having been easy for them and without the intervention of their wills, except by the expression of wishes quickly granted. But before the horror of that word "ruined," and all the dreadful things it represented to her, Mme. Brevier could not resign herself to believing in its possibility.

Gilles, ready to speak, planted himself in front of the fireplace, one hand in his waistcoat. Perhaps he was the one who suffered the most because he saw the inner meaning of it all, and because the utter loss of his own fortune had been a severe blow to him, an overwhelming grievance that, up to the present, his regard for the proprieties had not permitted him to exhibit too openly, though he was not the less affected by it in his mind. His digestion had been so upset by it, that he lived only on milk and soups. He looked at the three ladies with the superior expression of a well-bred martyr. Who would have been able to foretell him that instead of being assisted and supported as he had been hitherto, he would find himself at the head of the family in conditions as little flattering for his pride as formidable for his responsibility?

He spoke in a firm and measured voice, whose somewhat rasping tone produced an unpleasant impression on his wife, and even on his mother-in-law and Alice, who lived on a calm and superficial footing with him. He said—

"Labric and Aurandon, with whom we have

just examined the situation under every aspect, do not give us any room for hope. I have made up my mind that we must make immediate sacrifices, which the simplest common sense has forced me to recognize from the first moment."

He took his time over this diplomatic and well-modulated sentence. Mme. Brevier, lowering the lace handkerchief with which she was dabbing her eyes, could not refrain from throwing him a hard look as if she felt that he proposed these extreme methods for the pleasure of seeing them suffer.

"What sacrifices?" asked Raymonde in a slightly aggressive tone, for she grouped herself instinctively with the rest of her sex and all oppressed beings against the male—the creature who proclaimed a cold and cutting necessity in antagonism to their joyous illusions and their contempt of realities.

"Everything must be sold. First of all your country estate, Rosenoire, with the farm; for Labric knows of a certain purchaser. When the debts are liquidated"—his solemn tone brought the shadow of a mocking smile to his wife's lips—"there will scarcely be left a sum of thirty to forty thousand francs."

Mme. Brevier cried out: "But Labric's offer is ridiculous! Rosenoire is valued at more than three hundred thousand francs with all its improvements. Think of the proximity of the estate to Melun . . . it will always sell well!"

"But the expenses are running on, repairs are heavy, and you will be forced to sell it in the end. Therefore sell now."

Alice exhibited a brave, if sad, approval. She

loved the beautiful golden summers at Rosenoire, the high hedgerows crossing the hillside, the waters flowing all around—an expensive caprice of her father's; and the big corner of the forest which ended in lofty trees—hundreds of years old—overlooking the Seine and facing the golden fields of the far-stretching plain. How many hours she had spent wandering about the park with her books and her solitary dreams, and how sweet it was to forget Paris and its fever during those all too short couple of months!

Gilles continued: "Afterwards you will have to cancel the lease of this mansion, and sell all the valuable furniture."

"Never will I do that!" exclaimed Mme. Brevier. "What are you thinking of? The work of our life . . . these objects and rare collections . . . it would be a desecration. My poor Pierre lived amongst all these things, and now you propose our selling them!"

"It must be done," repeated Gilles, strong in his conviction. "It costs me much to have to repeat it. Don't forget that when your husband's loans are paid back, there will scarcely remain enough for you and Alice to live upon very poorly."

Alice wore an indefinable look, and raised her head; whilst Mme. Brevier lowered hers with a blush of shame mantling her cheeks. Raymonde eyed Gilles with a look of interested curiosity.

"But we were very wealthy," exclaimed Mme. Brevier in a doleful tone. "Hottmann has stolen more than six hundred thousand francs from us!"

"It was seven hundred and fifty-five thousand

francs, if you please," corrected Gilles, remembering his personal patrimony also lost.

"That money is ours, and we must get it back!"

"In what way," he demanded in a sceptical tone of voice. "Justice can do nothing against the de—, against those who no longer live."

"His wife is there."

"Mme. Hottmann is also ruined."

"There's The Four Seasons!"

"What measures can you take, and by what right? The concern cannot hold itself responsible for the personal defalcations and speculations of its directors; it will have all it can do not to go under itself. Roy-Chancel has been obliged to send in his resignation. Did you know," he added with a malicious smile, "that his wife, our friend Louise—a woman isn't a beautiful brunette for nothing—went to call upon Le Vigreux in the hope of serving as an expiatory victim and putting a stop to the attacks of his newspaper! Quite a scriptural peace-offering!"

He paused, embarrassed by the presence of Alice. Raymonde did not move a muscle, but a sudden spasm of jealousy darted through her heart. They were calumniating Mark! Even if Louise had eyes which shone like burning embers, and the supple figure of a gipsy, Mark was too proud to enter into such compacts. Besides, he did not care for brunettes—he had told her so—and the proof that he had slighted her was the fact that *La Vie* was continuing its articles. She had only been able to see Mark once during a short and official visit, which had been interrupted by Gilles.

But no matter, she did not doubt him, and, moreover, he was writing to her.

Mme. Brevier replied haughtily, as in the days of her power, and still beautiful in the sombre mourning which reduced her figure—

"I do not want to sell."

"You are not the only one to decide," he answered with a nervous politeness. "Hasn't Labric succeeded in convincing you that it is absolutely necessary?"

"Labric! Labric! All these business men are looking after their own interests."

"As far as I am concerned," he declared with restrained irony, "I am only thinking of yours, I assure you. This disaster, you will pardon my recalling it you, has affected me the same as it has you, and doubly so since it weighs as heavily upon my wife as on me. However, it is your affairs, not my own, that I am attending to at the present moment."

"Mamma!" insinuated Alice, in a conciliatory tone.

"But, Gilles, you are not all the laws and the prophets! I must have time to consider, to consult with some one."

"Who will advise you more disinterestedly than I?" objected he, in a wounded tone. "Michel, who is nearly one of the family, is the only person who has a certain title to intimacy that I recognize. Ask him his opinion, and if he does not share it . . ."

"Gilles is right, mother dear," ventured Alice. "Michel would think the same."

"I don't want to sell."

• "Then what will you live upon?"

"What shall we live upon?"

"Yes," replied Gilles, detaching each syllable.

"What—will—you—live—upon?"

He crossed the room while speaking, went to the big Regency bureau, where from amongst bundles of papers piled up under a paper-weight with unpaid bills—and these were pouring in all the time—letters and telegrams of condolence, he withdrew a document.

"There are loans to the extent of about three hundred thousand francs to be paid back by the heirs, and about sixty thousand francs of arrears." With a kind of wrathful facility he juggled with these figures, as if they possessed the amounts instead of owing them. "I won't even mention the notes which are still coming in—the interests falling due. The current ones—must I repeat it?—have only been met, thanks to the twenty thousand francs that Maître Labric had at his office, for you know that the safe was nearly empty." His look turned in the direction of the strong-box, a dark, steel, fortress-like object built in the wall.

He shook his head despondently. Those twenty thousand francs that the notary had on hand was the sum Brevier had destined for him. But what was this disappointment in comparison with all that he had lost? Raymonde and he, stripped of everything as if they had been robbed by brigands in a wood, reduced to live upon his salary—in other words, almost to want!

"Supposing it is so," exclaimed Mme. Brevier in an irritable tone. "Supposing it is so! We let

Rosenoire be sold, and the furniture, and pay the debts. What will happen then?"

"You have got to face the future," replied Gilles, "the tremendous change in your mode of life that it means. Have you thought about it?"

"No, not yet . . . it's not the time in such a sorrow. . . ."

"It has cost me not a little, believe me, to introduce into the sorrow of all three of you, of my own—for I loved your father with a tender respect"—and he addressed himself at these words to Alice, who at least understood him—"to introduce, I repeat, anxieties of a material order far less elevated. But we are not masters of the situation. We are expiating the generosity and the trustfulness of my father-in-law. Please remark that I am not casting any blame; only stating facts. Whether we wish it or not, fate has decreed for us, and we must face it bravely in as far as we can. What kind of life do you think of leading?" he asked Mme. Brevier.

"But—but why do you ask such a point-blank question?"

"Life in Paris will be impossible for you, and, what is more, too painful under the circumstances. When one has been, as you have, at the head of Parisian society"—a slight sneer accompanied these words—"one cannot sink too far down. You won't be able to entertain in a flat on the fifth floor." He looked at Raymonde while saying this. "You cannot pass with impunity before everybody's eyes, from extreme wealth to the strictest economy. I only see one course for you to take, that is, to disappear. You can either live in the

country on the income derivable} from your part of the inheritance, or——”

“You are mad, Gilles! You insult me! Do you mean to assert that at my age, at Alice’s, we should go and bury ourselves in some little village, take in needle-work, and milk cows? If you only have such ridiculous advice to offer——”

“I don’t know,” interrupted M. d’Arbelles, in a dry tone of voice, “whether it is ridiculous or not, but at any rate it is dictated by the urgency of the case, and I can answer for it. If you cannot face unconcernedly a premature retreat from Paris, which I can quite understand”—he said these words with an attempt at gallantry—“you can live abroad. I believe I am not mistaking Raymonde’s heart in supposing that she will ratify the second proposition that I am about to make to you, which is, to accompany us, you and Alice, to the consulate which I am soliciting. My home is yours, and with our united resources——”

“Where is it?” inquired Mme. Brevier. “In China?”

“Either in Australia or in the East; somewhere where life will be cheaper and my salary higher.”

Mme. Brevier looked at him with a scared expression on her face. Could she see herself being expatriated to the ends of the earth, thousands of miles from the Bois and the Rue de la Paix, from her relations, from everything which rendered life worth living to her?

She did not consider that this offer, coming from a son-in-law, and a son-in-law who was not

particularly fond of her, was after all rather meritorious. No! she could not picture herself in the rôle of a dethroned Mother-Queen, walking about in a white dressing-gown under paper parasols, fanned by punkahs under ceilings infested with lizards and cockroaches! Detesting nature, no provincial nor oriental sunset held any charm for her. She could not imagine either herself or her daughters in those far-distant regions. Not she! It seemed almost to her as if he were proposing some disgraceful bargain. No, she wanted to breathe freely, to go on enjoying the satisfaction of being some one amongst those who would continue to surround her with their flattering sympathy. She had not yet renounced the desire to shine in society. She wanted to go on living! How she was to do so she didn't know.

Raymonde preserved a disinterested silence. Alice said, with veiled emotion—

"Your thoughtfulness touches me and I am grateful for it. But your life will be difficult enough, and I wouldn't like to be an encumbrance to you."

Mme. Brevier turned towards the girl, surprised at hearing her utter such a decided opinion. Then she looked at Gilles. A strange feeling of bitterness was mingled with the forced gratitude of her expression. Did he want to sacrifice all three of them in those unhealthy climates? Apart from herself, there were her daughters! Did he think that Alice could get married in Timbuctoo?

The idea came to her, vague and yet quite maternal, that a splendid marriage would save both her daughter and herself. And a still vaguer idea came into her mind. That of Raymonde being

free, by some artifice or another, and making her life all over again, a life of wealth. These were the mirages of an imagination brought to bay, of a brain overwrought by fatigue and emotion. They flashed before her dazzled vision, then wavered and vanished.

"Your silence is sufficient answer," said Gilles. "Doubtless this proposal doesn't please you any better than the other one?"

"I must acknowledge . . . of course I am touched by it. . . . But it is hard to understand proposals so . . ."

"Oh, take your time about it;" and M. d'Arbelles, regaining mastery over himself, tapped the packet of papers and bills he was holding, with his finger-nail.

Prosper discreetly knocked at the door. Walking on the tips of his toes as though he were in a sick-room, and in a low voice, appropriate to the occasion, he informed Mme. Brevier that Mme. de Boyséon was wishing to see her, and that Miss Smollett had called to see Mdlle. Alice.

"I shall be there," said Mme. Brevier, whilst Alice went towards the room where her friend was waiting. Mme. Brevier smoothed her hair before a looking-glass, and passed a little powder-puff, hidden in her handkerchief, over her face. Gilles, Raymonde, and she looked at one another with the same thought in their minds—Alice's marriage.

Gilles, feeling heated, and craving the fresh air (these family scenes were so bad from a hygienic point of view), took up his hat.

"Don't go, Gilles," said Raymonde. "I want to have a talk with you."

CHAPTER IV

THERE was a long silence. It was the first occasion that Gilles and his wife had found to have a talk with one another. Their accumulated anxieties and secret preoccupations had made an explanation between them somewhat difficult, although they both wished and feared for one.

Raymonde had nestled herself amongst the sofa cushions, quite at her ease, and in such a natural position that the curves of her body were prettily outlined. She clasped together her unusually white fingers, which were blazing with rings, and her tiny foot, encased in its shoe adorned with an antique paste buckle, wriggled to and fro, showing a little of the openwork silk stocking. Mourning was marvellously becoming to her complexion, and grief had refined her features. Gilles was struck with the brightness of her eyes, and as, in spite of his many grievances, he was not insensible to his wife's beauty, he went and sat down upon a small chair beside her couch in a spirit of gloomy deference, ready for a truce if she but made the advances.

She looked at him. Was it possible, she asked herself, that this man whose nose she remarked as if it were the first time she had ever seen it, a nose long and fleshy and freckled, that this man

was her husband, the companion of her heart and thoughts, the lord and master upon whom she depended, the one who had the most intimate rights over her, one who—however much of a gentleman he was—she had an impression of scarcely knowing and caring for so little? This man her husband? How strange it was!

He was feeling worried again, as a consequence of the bad days which had separated them lately; but he never doubted in his masculine positiveness, that she was his wife, his property, his chattel, and therefore he would have liked her to show him a little affection and consolation, just at this moment when he was so much in need of a tender and comforting word.

He wished so earnestly not to feel jealous any more, to forget the past, to enjoy again a possible honeymoon. He gazed at her, and felt that he would never quite understand her. The ever-feminine mystery, with its complicated wiles, its discreet wariness, and all that he perceived particularly in her that was different and unknown, irritated and bewildered him. However, he still loved her, or at least felt passion for her.

At last Raymonde broke the silence. "Do you seriously propose that mamma and Alice should accompany you to China, or wherever it is?"

"Am I to understand that their society would be displeasing to you? It seemed to me, however, that it ought to be pleasanter to you than to me."

As a matter of fact, Mme. Brevier's society would have very much worried him, as he considered that hers was a dangerous influence, and thus their intercourse would be of a thorny nature.

He had acquitted himself of an ungrateful duty with the hope of the refusal which lightened it.

"Then you have the fixed intention of leaving France?" asked Raymonde.

"Yes; of course!"

"And to take me, too?"

"Certainly to take you with me;" and he smiled bitterly.

"Where do you think of going?"

"I have told you already—a long way off. The world is small, and we shall always be running against enough people whom it will be disagreeable enough to meet after the misfortune that has happened to us. Let us do our best to forget it all; we shall more easily forget it by ourselves, whereas, remaining in Paris would constantly recall the misery of it."

"And what is the necessity of leaving Paris?"

Gilles frowned, for he believed he had clearly enough stated his reasons. It was certainly not for any particular love for foreign countries that he was expatriating himself! There was something very different between being a poverty-stricken consul, overburdened with encumbrances, and a wealthy man of the world who condescends to fill an honorary position, the cares and hard work of which he leaves to his secretary and underlings. There was nothing very inspiring, after all, about gaining his livelihood like everybody else.

"We haven't anything to live upon here," he replied; "you know it better than I do."

"Can't you do something else?"

"What else can I do?"

She ran over various things in her mind.

Politics? Slender enough chance in that direction. Without capacity or special qualifications, of quite ordinary endowment, he could not possibly bombard a minister or director of the Fine Arts in the service of a Republic against which he was always railing.

"Besides, Paris is a very dear place, and we are ruined," continued Gilles.

She said composedly: "I quite understand that. I have thought about the matter a great deal, and no doubt you may be right. Your offer just now does you great credit, but, for myself, I don't feel any inclination to go into exile, therefore it is impossible for me to follow you."

"All the same, Raymonde, you will accompany me," he said decidedly, after a moment's thought, and whilst a shadow passed over his face.

"If you are determined to live abroad, there is nothing to prevent your going alone."

He uttered a cry of jealousy and revolt. "Go alone! You are joking. Leave you behind? Are you my wife or not? Your duty is to follow me, that's obvious; it's right, it's . . . the law!"

Her face wore a serious expression that he did not recognize, and without changing her position, her fingers still clasped and her active little foot still wriggling about at the bottom of her skirts, she replied—

"I fancy, Gilles, that we are going to be obliged to separate."

He became almost livid, as much with the sudden shock as with anger, for she had never spoken to him in this way.

"What do you mean?"

"You go . . . I stay; that's all."

"Will you kindly tell me why it is not agreeable for you to do what any other woman in your place would do? Our life is completely changed, and I accept the duties of a similar necessity. You aim at withdrawing from them. May I ask your reason for doing so?"

She looked him full in the eyes, and gently, with a grain of pity, replied—

"Look here, Gilles, you and I made a misdeal. We are not suited for one another. Neither our characters nor our tastes agree, and are doing so less and less. 'We are still young enough, both of us, not to continue obstinately until we come to a dead-lock. Hasn't the idea ever entered your head that you could recover your freedom and give me mine?'"

He rose and walked round the room with his hands behind his back, knotted so tight as almost to crack their joints. He answered roughly—

"No, such an idea has never come to me."

"Think about it," she ventured; "an amicable separation . . . provisional, at least."

"It's all arranged in my mind. You will not remain behind in Paris, either alone or with your mother. This atmosphere is already bad for you. I have authority over your future, and you will follow me."

She slowly shook her head. "No, Gilles. I see that my resolve hurts you. Say, if you like, that I am heartless—invoke your lofty principles—but my resolution is taken."

"You don't love me," he cried; "and you love another."

"I don't know if I love any one else"—she blushed deeply—"but you have just stated a great truth, and it costs me something to mention it. You are right; I don't care for you sufficiently to make a useless sacrifice."

Gilles sneered. "In other words, now that I am a poor man and impoverished by you—that's to say by your father—you leave me! This is indeed a fine and noble act! I was resigned to losing my fortune, but you, too, Raymonde—oh no!"

She raised herself to go nearer to him with some show of emotion.

"Let me tell you that if you had remained a rich man I should have spoken to you just the same. I had made up my mind to do so. A little sooner or later doesn't matter. My frankness is not the result of recent events, they have hastened it, nothing more."

Gilles' face was all discomposed. "Be quite frank, then," he answered. "It is not a provisional separation which you are considering but a permanent one. My family position is no longer of any value to you and you want some one who is well lined with money. In order to do that you must be either a widow or a divorced woman. Well, I am hoping to live a long time, and I shall never divorce you. I will not even hear of a separation. You will remain my wife, let it be well understood!"

"Then we shall be," replied Raymonde, "like so many other married couples who are united under the husband's name, but dragging each one of us away from the other, since we cannot possibly live amicably together."

He planted himself in front of her with an insane desire to seize her by the wrists and drag her along by the hair of her head. Her calm—for she was usually so quick-tempered—exasperated him. Tears were in his voice as he said—

“Yes, Raymonde, you are a wicked woman. You only think of others, never of me. You are corrupted by luxury and vanity. The only thing that counts with you is to shine in society and please others. You are even worse than I imagined. But I possess you, and I shall keep you and watch over you. And see that you don’t take a lover, either Le Vigréux or any other, for, if you do, I shall kill you and him also.”

He brandished his fist in the air as he said these words.

A sad little laugh issued from her round throat.

“Don’t be melodramatic and ambiguous, Gilles. It doesn’t become you. To kill your wife, you must be either a brute or a husband very passionately in love. You are neither the one nor the other. It is true that I am wanting in courage and cannot face a restricted life. But whilst you are overwhelming me with reproaches did you not take part in our life and accept all its advantages and pleasures? It doesn’t come well from you to reproach me. You are just as vain as I am! What do you want? I am young, I am not bad-looking, and I have only one life to lead. A woman doesn’t bury herself alive at twenty-six years of age.”

“Why did you marry me?” said Gilles, and weakly yielding, he would still have taken her in his arms.

He knew what it was, however, to suffer from the humiliation of being repulsed. But after all, she was his!

She replied, "Well, then, why did you marry me? We knew a little of one another and we wanted to unite our fortunes. It was your name and my wealth. It has all failed, and we cannot do anything to remedy it, therefore let us wind up our affairs."

He leant towards her and said, "But at any rate I loved you . . . I did, Raymonde!"

"Do you think so?" she said, drawing herself back, repelled by the affectionateness of his words and gestures.

"And you also, Raymonde, or else your kisses, your lips, your arms, have lied to me. . . ."

She was shaken by a feeling of indignant shame. She saw on his face the persistent look, the smile, whose intimate familiarity wounded her like an insult. Why did he remind her of a wife's servitude, the slave, not only of the man but of herself, her varying moods, the weakness of her flesh, her senses? Had she ever really belonged to him? She would certainly have sworn that she had not. Once more she looked at the fleshy freckled nose, the carefully tended beard, and like a woman, sincere in her forgetfulness of the past, she disengaged her hands which he was pressing between his cold ones, and said—

"This is quite enough, Gilles."

He made an abrupt gesture, then finding his hat, he left the room saying—

"You will do well to think over it, Raymonde. I have said my last word."

CHAPTER V

MME. DE BOYSÉON wore a velvet dress of dark mauve suitable for the occasion. With head held on high and sparkling eyes she rose to greet Mme. Brevier, contented herself with pressing the other's hands warmly and patting them between hers.

"Ah! my dear Jeanne, I did not dare to call sooner to disturb your sorrow, but my son and I have been, you may be sure, cut to the heart by your great troubles! How are you? Not too unnerved, I trust. And how are your daughters? What a terrible misfortune! That poor M. Brevier! I can see myself again seated beside him at table, the evening of the dinner, and he didn't appear to be in any great pain. What an insignificant thing life is, after all! You received my letter, I hope, expressing all my sympathy and friendship?"

As she spoke she gave a stealthy glance at herself in the mirror opposite to make sure that her hat was on straight. Then, from the sofa, upon which she had seated herself, she bent forward nearer to Mme. Brevier, and again took her hands.

"How sad it is to think," she continued, "that misfortunes never come singly! There's our beautiful dream destroyed! How lucky it is that the hearts of our two children were not too deeply

engaged, for it makes our task the less painful, doesn't it, dear friend?"

She did not add that, during the past week she had been expecting a word from Mme. Brevier announcing the financial catastrophe, thus being the first, from pride, to cause a rupture. The long silence had put her in a position to withdraw from their mutual understanding and to put an end to any hope that had been entertained. There must not be a moment's hesitation. In her eyes, marriage was only a good business's arrangement. With extreme condescension her son would have married Alice, rich; but poor, she only deserved total forgetfulness. Her maternal disappointment had been added to by the wrong that this miserable affair might do her son, for this marriage had already been spoken about, and although everybody would understand and approve of their acting thus, yet it was a great nuisance, and loss of time. Besides, she had now to look out for another bride!

Really these Breviers were impossible! And to think that the crash might have taken place after the young people had been united, tied together for life! A shiver ran down her spine at the very thought. No, one couldn't imagine such a thing! But she must be calm, she had made up her mind to proceed gently.

Mme. Brevier's proud silence embarrassing her, she continued, "Maurice is naturally very concerned about it. Your charming daughter pleased him very much, and me, too! Why do these social necessities and this dreary common-sense view of things come between the free choice

not been encroached upon, and will not be left out of the family, has given me to understand that she intends to make Alice a princely dowry. Alice is really worth as much to-day"—and at these words she eyed Mme. de Boyséon from head to foot—"as she was yesterday."

This falsehood, which saved the situation and came to her so spontaneously that she hadn't the time to consider its morality, was uttered with such a tone of haughty certainty that Mme. de Boyséon, discomfited for the moment at least, was sorry she had committed herself so decisively. But it was too late now, the bridges were down! It was true, she had not remembered the aunt who might be very liberal in the present, and from whom there were hopes for the future. She had only seen the open precipice at her feet. But now her spite was increased. If there were still time to face about! But a doubt, suspicion, bitterness, and other complex sentiments kept her back. She assumed a conciliatory expression, which was not becoming to her rugged features, as she said, "I am indeed very pleased to hear this news! It would have given me too much pain to have left you with the impression I was under when I came. At any rate our dear children can now be happy without either of them having run the risk of being sacrificed for the other."

She rose to take leave. "Good-bye, dear Mme. Brevier, my best wishes accompany you. You can always rely upon my friendship."

Once again she held Mme. Brevier's hands, keeping them between her own as though she had no wish to relinquish them. But her face,

which wore an expression of revenge and hatred, belied her words. She ran her eyes over the furniture, upholstered in its old-time silk, and the Persian rugs, through the long suite of rooms.

"How heart-breaking you must find it not to be able to keep all these marvels! But you have plenty of courage. Good-bye!"

After having uttered her cutting farewell, which almost suffocated Mme. Brevier, she departed with an air of bravado that might have been borrowed from her late husband, when he passed at full gallop before his regiment—if one hadn't known that the general, downright gouty towards the end of his command, was obliged to mount his horse by the aid of a chair, and that this operation drew from him, with much grimacing, many an oath of pain.

Behind Mme. de Boyséon, Prosper respectfully closed the door, then yawned once or twice, rolled his eyes round until they nearly tumbled from their sockets, simulated the gesture of blowing his nose with his gloved fingers, and ejaculated in a sepulchral voice, "Ruined!"

Mme. Brevier only had time to regain her room, and sinking on her bed to smell convulsively a bottle of salts. Ah! How Society, through that woman's mouth, brutally indicated its laws! She quite forgot how badly she had once behaved to Michel because he was poor, now she tasted to the very dregs the sickening sensation of seeing Alice repulsed for the same reason.

Was it possible that already nothing of their distress was unknown? That allusion, however, to the sale which Gilles advised had been clear enough! And she had been forced to lower herself to tell a

lie, to invent a dowry through Aunt Eloi's generosity! Ah! Ah! It was indeed, too funny, seeing that she had been obliged to listen, with suffering patience, to the fulminating outbreaks of the old miser against Pierre's folly, his blindness, his imprudence, his everything! "You will die in a garret. Imagine trusting people!" For she was less angry, as a matter of fact, with Hottmann's rascality, than with Pierre's sense of honour. The first was only fulfilling his *rôle*, but the second had failed in his family duties!

For one moment she had believed that her aunt, in her indignation, was going to break definitely with them this time. On returning home, Mme. Le Martin had had an attack of indigestion, whipped Kiki, and made Mdle. Duverset weep, by dint of saying brutal things to her, but fortunately her sensitiveness had been well hardened in Mme. Le Martin's service. For several days the aunt had not given any other sign of life than that of sending them an enormous basket of preserved fruits—which she hated herself—and which had been sent to her from Nice.

Of course, there was Aunt Eloi—and how could one tell? Mme. Brevier suddenly sat upright, and her face lighted up under this sudden thought. Yes, perhaps . . . why not? She would never give Alice a dowry. But why should she not allow herself to be credited with a rumour so flattering for her, and that there would always be time to deny? In that way she would get all the credit of performing a generous action, and, at least, give them the opportunity of gaining time. It would prevent them putting suitable aspirants to flight. But Aunt

Elôï would laugh in her face, and show her suspiciousness, scenting, with her distrustful character, some kind of a sly trap.

Ah! The tyranny of money, without which one is helpless and can do nothing. She shrugged her shoulders with a movement of despair. Where could she find it? To have it at any price!

She looked at herself in her Psyche looking-glass, and saw that she was looking frightfully old, as if, in these last two hours, ten years had passed over her. That very morning her scales had registered an abnormal loss of weight. To grow old! With all these sorrows weighing her down, her cup was indeed full! A selfish regret, united with the sense of her absolute powerlessness, threw her back on the memory of her husband, who was the involuntary cause of all her suffering. She did not want, however, to reproach him, although . . . !

"My poor Pierre," she murmured, "it is fortunate for you that you don't see my unhappiness!"

And this proud woman sobbed aloud.

CHAPTER VI

DURING this time, Alice and Florence, hand in hand and eyes fixed on one another, were talking affectionately.

A tender pity illumined Miss Smollett's independent countenance and candid-looking eyes. She would so much have liked to remain near her friend and to help her with the support of her presence and friendship, but fate decreed that she was obliged to announce her sudden departure for distant parts. Her betrothed, an officer in India, had broken his leg in a fall from his horse, and it was feared that he would be a cripple. She was leaving France to rejoin and marry him. She had not seen her betrothed, James Harrison, for four years, but the calm sentiment which united them was not the less deep on that account. Quite naturally she spoke of consecrating her life to his misfortune, now that there was all the more need of his being loved. Lame, helping himself along by the aid of crutches, he would be just as dear to her as when he leaped over the hedges and ditches of Dove Park—the Smollett's country place—on the back of Red Bay, or, clad in his tennis flannels, slender and full of life, he struck the ball after exclaiming: Play!

Alice, quite moved, admired Florence for speaking of these things so simply. She seemed

only to pity James, forgetting herself. But what grief she must have felt, and how many tears she must have shed on hearing of the accident, and all that her wounded lover, far from any town and under a burning sun, must have suffered with his bad fracture and high fever, whilst he was being carried along, and until the day dawned, when he was declared out of danger. With a composure full of charm in a young, pretty and smiling girl, Florence said—

“Yes, darling, I don’t know whether or not we shall return immediately to Europe. James will not be able to remain in the army. Perhaps he will go into business, as idleness will be impossible to him, and bad as well. He is so energetic, so convinced that a man ought to make himself useful, and work hard in order to . . . to . . . how do you French say? . . . to excel!” Then she added, “But you, dear, I cannot bear the idea of leaving you in such sadness. And all these terrible things happening, too! Of course you are brave—I know you are—but you are going to suffer through others, through those who are nearest to you. Have you yet decided what you are going to do? There is one thing you can do, Alice, and that is to come with me. James will be delighted to see you, and this voyage will do you a lot of good, I am sure. Don’t shake your head like that”—and she imitated her friend’s negative movement—“but like this;” and she nodded her head up and down.

Alice smiled at the spontaneous offer, even in her distress, but how could she yield to it? Without resources she could not put herself under the

obligation of this generous friend who would have offered her, she knew, a large sum, either as a loan or gift, if she had not feared to wound her. She knew how capable Florence was of devotion to her friends, having recently made a settlement on one of them in order to enable her to marry. She had also saved from ruin another friend whose husband had become entangled in a bad business transaction. But Alice's pride would not lend itself to a compromise which was more forbidden to her than to another.

Besides, it was necessary that she made up her mind to live an independent life and earn her own living. Florence argued that this would be a much easier matter abroad, but this would mean a far distant and immediate exile, whilst her mother was now struggling with countless difficulties. She certainly feared nothing for herself, but she did not wish to be found wanting in any filial duty that might be placed upon her. How could she withdraw from such a recent family misfortune? Later on, when affairs were more settled and her mother had adopted a plan of living, she might be able to claim her liberty of action.

With an attentive expression Miss Smollett followed her explanations. Yes, she quite understood how it was. They were not perhaps very excellent reasons, for Mme. Brevier would not fail to have plenty of advisers,—she had Mme. d'Arbelles, her married daughter, also Maître Labric and Maître Aurandon, the lawyers—and therefore Alice would not be a very great help to her; but her reasons were chivalrous and kind-hearted, and she perfectly understood them.

"Look here, darling, this lovely trip would be the very best thing for you in your troubles. Oh, I don't mean to forget them; we would think together of those whom we love; but at least you would no longer have under your eyes all these sorrowful sights. You could live with Florence and James as long as they didn't bore you to death, and there would be nothing in your surroundings to remind you of all that's going to be so embittering for you here—for I foresee that such will be the case. Believe me, dear, since you are not happy here and since there is no real expansion for your affections and intellect, break the thread, pack up your trunks, and come with me."

"Don't tempt me, Florence dear," replied Alice. "It is not that I lack the desire to do it. Yes, I know and feel that your loving kindness offers me a unique opportunity of breaking with the past and opening up a new future, but . . ."

"It isn't kindness, Alice, it's only friendship. Wouldn't you do the same for me if you were in my place? And I ask you whether your scruples are financial ones? Why, dear, money is but a dirty obnoxious kind of thing. It doesn't deserve the consideration we give to our higher scruples. Do you imagine you will be under any kind of obligation to me? Not even by the tip of your little finger-nail. It's I who would be far more indebted to you for being able to come to you when I am in trouble, and I know that James would appreciate having you for a friend."

She put her hands firmly upon Alice's shoulders as though to impress her will, and continued, "Don't think about it, dear, but say Yes very

quickly with your eyes^f shut, and you won't be able to go back upon it, for you have only one word to utter."

Alice closed her eyes, but the little word would not issue from her lips. And yet the temptation was very great. To flee from this house; to leave this city behind and the thousand and one well-known faces on which from henceforth she would read only indifference or contempt! To escape from these surroundings for which, in spite of the ties of blood, no soul-attachment retained her—her mother so different from herself and Raymonde so unrestful—and 'without her being able to do anything towards their happiness or welfare! Yes, she might just as well break the chain and act, not like a French girl, the slave of custom, of conventionality, brought up in the shadow of the hearth, in the circle of the family lamp, but like a young and independent English girl who, conscious of what she wants and strong in her sense of personal responsibility, sets forth with a light firm footstep towards the open horizon, the higher life! If indeed there was a single reason which could retain her here, a hope, however dim! If there were only one human being who was interested in her and upon whom she could rely, a brother, a friend! But no, she was alone, fearfully alone! And she acknowledged to herself with deep sorrow that never had Michel seemed farther off. All this time Miss Smollett was looking at her with a grave yet mischievous expression, her meaning smile showing every one of her large white teeth.

"I am thinking, darling, that you will not care about marrying any of James's friends because you

prefer one of your gay-hearted frivolous young Frenchmen, and that's why you will let your poor Florence embark all alone—oh, she will be terribly lonely—the day after to-morrow at Marseilles on the splendid boat, the *Prince Edward*! Ralph Rugby is her captain, and he's a splendid one, also a perfect gentleman. Papa knows him intimately. Yes, you haven't told me all your reasons, and I, innocently was listening . . .”

At the forced liveliness of her friend, the sprightly courage which, however, did her so much good, Alice answered with a melancholy smile—

“You can be sure of this, that I am under no illusion as to the visit that Mme. Boyséon is paying my mother at this very moment.”

“That's all very well, Alice; but tell the truth. You are much too proud to suffer really because Captain de Boyséon sees fit to withdraw his request for your hand; an act in which he does not appear to advantage. There's nothing particularly glorious about that. You don't care for M. de Boyséon, and he is not the one you would have married, and it isn't for him you prefer to remain in France.”

Alice, embarrassed, murmured quickly, “You know very well, Florence, that nobody loves me, and that I don't love anybody.”

“Now, look here, dear, I am going to tell you a thing worth knowing. You must marry M. Michel Lorin, who is very intellectual, very noble-hearted, but has an execrable temper, and loves you very dearly.”

Alice blushed, tears of humiliation came into her eyes, and she said, in tones of deep distress—

"If you have any love for me, Florence, never mention that to me again. Michel doesn't think of me, and I don't think of him. Everything is for the best like that."

"Oh, I haven't wanted to grieve you, darling. I like M. Michel very much indeed, although if I were his wife I should always be arguing with him. But listen. If you won't marry him, you won't, that's all. When all these sad and troublesome interests here are settled, and you find you have nothing better to do, if you still remember me with friendship, cable me one word, 'I leave.' You will take the boat at Marseilles, and come out to us. Will you promise me?"

"Yes," said Alice, "perhaps."

She had just experienced a sharp emotion at hearing Florence speak so decidedly of a possible union with Michel. But, first of all, he did not want her, he had no affection for her, and even if he should love her some day, it was not she, now poor, who would consent to render the career which he had created, by dint of his will-power, still heavier than it was already. He had scarcely enough to provide for himself alone. Ah! If she still had that unfortunate dowry—the idea of which had never given her any real pleasure, but a good deal of shame in the thought that men did not seek her for herself but for her money. . . . If she only still had it! Bah! It was always Michel, with his ridiculous pride, who did not want to marry her. Ah! She had successfully penetrated that miserable masculine pride which, scrupulously diffident, will not put itself under any obligation to any

one. Well! Why should she possess less pride than he?

For the first time, she felt with sorrow how deeply the question of money is mixed up with our lives. Florence deceived herself in trying to persuade her that M. de Boyséon's retreat was quite indifferent to her. She had too much heart, and her sensitiveness was too bruised under her apparent courage, not to suffer—at least, as far as her pride was concerned—from a feeling of cowardice, which is not only admitted, but, in such circumstances, commanded by the current morality of society. Had she counted for so little, she herself, when he addressed her in that courteous manner, and with so much deferential sympathy? Were his kind attentions intended only for what she represented in actual cash? She told herself that she did well to despise money. There was something degrading about it. Why should this man have pleased her before she had learned to know him? She confessed to herself, with some shame, that he had not been altogether antipathetic to her. She had, for the moment, at least, felt the charm of his physical attractiveness. She was very angry with herself for this, and some of her obscure feelings of bitterness went out towards Michel. It was because of him, because of his challenging manner, that she had talked such a long time with Boyséon. The antagonism of their past hostility towards one another returned to her memory. Only one thing had brought them closer together—their mutual pious thoughts of the departed one. In that sorrow, at least, they had been joined.

Miss Smollett, rising, said, "I must kiss you

now, dear, and say good-bye, for I have a great deal to do. But I shall be seeing you again before my departure, and, whatever happens, remember that Florence is your friend, whether near or far, always and for life!"

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CHAPTER VII

DURING the following days Gilles was feverishly occupied with the sale of the furniture. As far as Rosenoire was concerned the affair was concluded. Unfortunately, big bills, pressing for settlement, were constantly arriving—dressmakers', milliners', upholsterers', provision merchants', all of them presented by mere boys without any tact. Prosper, generally so self-controlled, had been obliged to send one of these little wretches headlong, for bringing a bill for ice three times, and, seated upon his ice-box, declaring he wouldn't move until he was paid.

Experts, introduced on Maître Labric's advice, conferred together whilst handling articles of furniture and examining the pictures. The catalogues were being printed on fine art paper with illustrations. Trac had designed the frontispiece; Maître Vapaille, whose ferrety nose thrust itself into everything, came and offered his services, which had not been requested. The sale was advertised to take place at the end of the month, and was circulated from one to the other, and by means of articles in the newspapers, some of them correct, others more or less witty, and one or two of them malicious. Gilles grimaced over all this, but had no opportunity of showing his anger. He received,

kindly enough, the newspaper reporters who came to interview him, although he felt angry with them, and he allowed an illustrated magazine to take a photograph of the library by magnesium light, which was accompanied by a suffocating white smoke.

Between times he worried his chief in the ministry, beat up everybody he knew to get recommendations, and importuned Morande and several deputies. He wanted to secure his nomination, persuading himself that Raymonde would yield before the accomplished fact. He would not consider for a moment leaving Raymonde behind, and, in his misery, he held on to her as to a ransom. She had already cost him too much that he should think of giving her up, and he cherished the notion that in the future she would reward him for all he had lost through her when certain hopes which were personated by Aunt Eloi, etc. . . . And he considered this calculation quite legitimate, although, of course, he was too much of a gentleman to make the slightest allusion to it.

Owing to the deep mourning which both he and his wife wore, their movements and visits were for the time being suspended, and as this kept her at home, he felt re-assured. He had arranged with M. Trochard to stop any further proceedings for the present, because of their expense and apparent uselessness.

One evening he returned home with his face brighter than usual. He had just been offered an important position, and one beyond his expectations, namely, the consulate of Batavia, and he had accepted it. He made Raymonde acquainted with

it as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and had been mutually agreed upon right along. He added some details as, for instance, that life in the Dutch Indies was dear, so that the forty thousand francs salary was not any too much. Then the climate, etc. !

She made no objections until he continued, "We will go out in February. At present your mother and sister have no longer need of my services, and the greater part of the inheritance will be settled very soon."

Then she replied with a resolute smile, and a new light of decision in her eyes—

"You will go out by yourself. I shall remain behind in Paris, as you very well know."

"Are you aware that your refusal to accompany me will release me from all legal pecuniary obligations on your account? Think well about this. What are you going to live upon?"

"I haven't thought about it yet; but I shall come out all right. May be I shall go on the stage."

He looked at her as if she had gone insane. The Viscountess Gilles d'Arbelles on the stage! She would never dream of such a thing, surely!

"Oh yes, it's all right," she continued. "Laroze believes that I shall succeed, and speaks of procuring me an engagement at the Vaudeville theatre. I should not be the first society woman who has gone on the boards. It's quite allowable in the present day."

"I shall forbid you to do it," Gilles exclaimed. "I must exercise my marital authority . . . you are totally without any sense of moral responsibility."

It had just crossed his mind with a feeling of terror what a commotion would be caused in society and in the newspaper press, the peculiar figure he himself would cut, if this ridiculous, monstrous and utterly distasteful notion were acted upon! Such an idea was preposterous! He knew that Laroze was the almighty power at the Vaudeville; and there was no doubt whatever that such a sensational engagement could be contrived. Raymonde was an excellent actress, and played with distinction and with an exceptional understanding of the part allotted her. The applause which she had gained the previous winter at Mme. Aguilano's in *Le Chandelier*, and in *Les Folies Amoureuses* at the Princess Sophia's, had rather flattered him, though at the same time he felt humiliated and jealous.

In his mind's eye he saw an actress's dressing-room, as he had seen them, overflowing with flowers and draped in yellow silk—why yellow?—with a crowd of men in their dress suits and smartly-gowned women making an irruption upon the star, pell-mell, with actors and actresses, all exclaiming, "Splendid, wonderful! Bravo! Ah, what a triumph for you, dear friend!" And he, where would he be during all this? How could he endure the thought of the promiscuity of such a life, the elbowing with scene-shifters, etc. No, it was downright madness!

The thing which disquieted him the most was the profound change which was manifested lately in Raymonde's manner, her fits of self-absorbed silence, her doleful and languid attitudes with the smelling-salts always within reach. She moped as

if she were attacked by some disease of the mind, suddenly smiling to herself in a peculiar way.

They did not get any further that day. But Gilles retained, from this short war of words accompanied by pointed looks, a feeling of uneasiness, which was still further deepened by his wife's downright coldness towards him. What was the use, he asked himself, of being married to one who acted like a stranger, whom he did not even attempt to kiss when they separated at night on the threshold of their rooms, because he was so afraid of exciting an instinctive and disobliging repulse.

"Will you go with me to Rosenoire?" he asked her the following day; "we must make a selection from the furniture your mother wishes to keep back. It will only take a few hours."

"Go with mamma. As for me I am too tired, and shall not leave the house."

Gilles was obliged to resign himself to going alone with his mother-in-law in the motor, which she had retained for her use. This was the first time it had been taken out since the sad event. With a kind of unreasoned fear he now warned M. Trochard to keep a watch on the entrances and exits which might take place at their residence, and he had even been crafty enough to say to Prosper (their own footman, Germain having been dismissed for want of respect):

"Don't admit any visitors, as Madame is not well."

"Talk away as much as you like," said Prosper to himself; and immediately after it was as if some one were saying to him, "I am not at home to any

one, Prosper; but should M. Le Vigreux ask for me, you can show him into the smaller drawing-room," and he would make answer, "Oh, just so, with pleasure."

Quite impassive, the old butler acquiesced to Gilles' remark with a deep bob. Didn't he know what it all meant? It was not worth while having been twenty years in the service of one family if you had not discovered all its little secrets. Besides, he would protect Raymonde, whose "chic" he much admired, for if Le Vigreux's letters had succeeded in reaching their destination without any accident, and before Gilles could intercept them, it was because Prosper, who knew the handwriting of all their correspondents, made it his duty to filch these particular letters, and to present them to Madame on a silver salver when she was quite alone. This was a zealous discretion for which Raymonde was grateful to him; there was between them an equivocal and unavoidable complicity which she veiled under a manner of indifference, accompanied by the mere shadow of an enigmatical smile.

Le Vigreux would come. Raymonde had no doubt on that point. She had only to raise and lower the window-blind of her sitting-room several times when he was passing at the hour mentioned in his last letter. "He could go no longer without seeing her," he wrote. "The seclusion in which she was keeping herself was sending him mad. To talk with her before others was an infliction for him which the marked coldness of her husband did not encourage him to repeat. He wanted to see her as soon as there was any hope of her being alone. It

she would warn him as to this, he would find the means."

When a servant from *La Vie*, a thin, sharp fellow, who had been on the look-out behind a big chestnut tree in the Park Monceau, had run to Le Vigreux's little abode in the Rue du Général Foy, to announce the departure of the motor and describing those who were in it, he leapt into a cab and directed it to be driven to the Brevier's residence.

But, as usual, he glanced all round to see whether he was being followed, because these things happen when a person is very notorious, and police officials sometimes did him this honour on their chief's account, or that of the Minister of the Interior. It was a habit of his, and he suffered no inconvenience in doing it. Thus, he was not surprised to see hurriedly hailing a cab, M. Trochard, whose large mild-looking face was not altogether unknown to him, because of his having come across it a little oftener of late than was altogether within reason, and also because—a fact that the detective had deemed it superfluous to acquaint M. d'Arbelles—the said Trochard had been entrusted by Le Vigreux a long time since with some delicate negotiations, in which, it is true, he had failed for want of sufficient cleverness to carry the affair through. Le Vigreux had a memory for faces that never failed him.

Suddenly stopping his cab and paying the driver at the corner of the Rue Monceau he did not allow the one which was following him to do the same at a little distance off. With a gesture of pleased recognition he threw open the door of the Trochard's cab and jumped into the vehicle, with the agility

of a young man, before the occupant had dared to make a protest.

"Ah! M. Trochard, we are indeed well met! Why haven't you been to see me lately, and I an old client of yours? It's treachery, I say. What are you being paid for doing this? You know that with me you can always earn something worth having."

"But, M. Le Vigreux . . ."

"Now, don't play any tricks with me. Is M. d'Arbelles giving you thirty or forty francs a day? It's miserable pay! What are you tiring yourself out for? Word your report, as you know how, with a little imagination. I will supply you with the particulars, if need be. Bring it to me at seven o'clock this evening, the office will be open for you."

"Oh, M. Le Vigreux, my conscience, you know . . ."

"Hasn't nature given you two hands, M. Trochard, in order to fulfil the maxim, 'Let not the right hand know' . . . ?"

"What the left hand receives?"

"That's common-sense, Trochard. Look here, you would commit a foolish act to treat me like an enemy, or, what is still more serious, with indifference. Am I a man not to be considered? What in the world have you got brains for?"

"Oh, really, M. Le Vigreux," protested the big fellow, confusedly. "Believe me or not, as you like, but I have not yet, since I have had the weariness—yes, I can well call it weariness—to follow up this affair, handed in a note or a word which could possibly do you any harm. You will reply that there has been nothing to tell up to the present,

but I could have invented something. Well, no, I couldn't get myself to do that. The moment I could have done you an injury I feel sure I should have gone straight to you and told you everything. Sympathy counts for more than people think in our calling. I have often saved nice little women because they were pretty, and I have had husbands 'run to earth' because I took a dislike to them without troubling myself to find out how I was to get paid. Every human being interprets honour in his own way."

"To be sure. Don't trouble yourself any more than to come to the office of my newspaper, and give your name to the door-keeper."

"I shall be 'M. Robert,' you understand. It's my custom . . ."

"Anything you like—Monte Cristo,—Vidocq, Peyrade! Until this evening, M. Troch . . . Robert! Stop, driver!"

Le Vigreux leapt deliberately to the pavement, whilst M. Trochard, pressing together his thick lips in a quiet smile, enjoyed one of those complicated and tasty morsels which are come across in a calling where the unexpected is mixed up with the droll side of life, where imagination touches reality, and where it would seem that tragedy was constantly collaborating with comedy.

It is quite certain that he had made a mistake up to the present. The pretty Mme. d'Arbelles excited his sympathies, whilst her husband appeared to him something of a noodle, and, moreover, it was impossible to refuse anything to that brutal, but, at the same time, persuasive, wielder of men and affairs who was named Le Vigreux.

It was quite true that M. Trochard did not work only for money. He brought into the machinery of his business an individual system of morals which sometimes caused him to become the providential agent of a person's fate. He was something of a *dilettante*, a man of taste, and it was necessary to be so in order not to sicken and tire of a calling which was not wanting in its risks and mortifications.

CHAPTER VII.

RAPIDLY Le Vigreux traversed the slight distance which separated him from his destination. He was rejoiced at seeing Raymonde once more ; and his affairs were proceeding exactly as he wished. Roy-Chancel had at last caved in and put one hundred thousand francs in a new combination for advertising in *La Vie*, without its having cost his honour anything, since it was in vain that his wife had endeavoured to obtain an acquittal by the expiatory offer of her dark and vivacious beauty. Flattering enough step, to be sure—was the husband aware of it ?—and an attractive temptation which wouldn't involve him in any consequences ; but, as that excellent Trochard professed, each man has his own code of honour, and, as a matter of principle, Le Vigreux never tangled up his business affairs with his love affairs. As a matter of fact, the consequences of Hottmann's suicide were not only astounding, but had overwhelmed him with work. Having made the best of that sinister affair, he, as a clever manipulator of financial shipwrecks, now sought his profit in the reorganization and provisional refloating of The Four Seasons.

If the involuntary responsibility which devolved upon him at Brevier's death did not trouble his conscience—for nothing had obliged that poor

Brevier to put his trust in a thief—his feelings as a lover were tormented with remorse. It grieved him to think of Raymonde suffering. Bandit as he was in the true sense of the word, yet he was chivalrous; and he wanted to compensate her for the injustice of fate. Far from these weeks of sepa^tation having chilled his thoughts, occupied as they were with so many diverse interests, the fixed idea of his love and passion held complete sway over him. Under its influence he had never exhibited greater lucidity and daring; gigantic projects succeeded each other in his brain. *La Vie* had during this month increased its subscribers by ten thousand, and was now less a daily sheet of news than an immense and formidable machine of political, industrial, and financial speculations, which every morning churned up public opinion, and kept it fomenting at white heat even to the lower-most dregs of its readers.

It was with an imperious bearing that he ran up the flight of steps. Prosper opened the door immediately to him, and said—

“Madame d’Arbelles will receive monsieur on the second floor.”

Le Vigreux, whilst making his way upstairs, recalled to mind the last evening he was there, when the little conservatory was plunged in darkness, and he pressed a white phantom in his arms. With an almost explosive power this passionate love filled him with fever, and he felt he could move worlds for the conquest of this woman. Obstacles appealed to his athletic hands, and he recognized no bounds to his will and his pride. He had the familiar but intensified impression that

he was there as in his own house, and that whatever he wanted most, however difficult, however impossible, would be accomplished. This confidence in himself was the mainspring of his energy.

He remained standing in the little drawing-room, deeply moved and with a vague feeling of respect. This light-coloured ornamentation and fragile furniture, these delicate and artistic ornaments, all bore the imprint of the dear being who, for months and months, had possessed his thoughts. Never had anything of the kind happened to him before. Who would have believed that he, Le Vigreux, could have fallen in love like that, and become the slave of a look and a smile? But so it was. A beautiful photograph of Raymonde, in which she looked him full in the face, in a low-necked dress, touched him. He priced the value of the pearl necklace that the picture represented her as wearing, and dreamt of giving her one later on much more beautiful, more regal. Had she been thinking of him? Did she love him as much as he loved her? He thought how ridiculous it was for a strong man like himself to experience this disturbing emotion, almost amounting to agony; but what did it matter? Passion doesn't reason—and he was going to see her—and he was happy.

Raymonde appeared. After a week of indisposition, her complexion was once more blooming, and never had her beautiful skin been so dazzling. Her eyes were shining, and her full, red lips excited one's desire to bite them. She was transfigured at the joy of seeing Mark once more freely

and quite alone, and there was no misunderstanding in the prompt and passionate exchange of their looks. Suffering, grief, and anxiety had wonderfully chastened this young woman's soul, and had rendered her more malleable and more tender. The desire to be understood and comforted was proved by the movement of joy with which she held out her two hands to him. He seized them both, looking hungrily at the graceful white arms which issued from the loose, lace sleeves of her deep mauve velvet tea-gown. In this embrace he had the impression that he was enjoying her as a beautiful flower, a rare fruit whose penetrating charm, by a reciprocal attraction, gave him, too, the absolute certainty of being pleasing to her; the strong, mutual feeling in which both their bodies and souls were equally surrendered to one another.

"Ah, dearest, how much you have undergone, and how much I have suffered away from you. It seems to me as though months and years have passed, and that I am seeing you again for the first time. Now, at last, it is you, your dear self, such as you are when there is nobody prying upon us and restraining us . . ."

"Mark, my poor friend . . ."

"Yes, indeed, your poor friend! However cruel your grief may have been, however bitter your cares, my sufferings have equalled them. No longer to see you, to prow! round this house which I could not visit because of your mourning . . . and your husband . . ."

She sat down beside him, and in the abandonment of such a sincere emotion, was nearly

overcome. She looked at him with a long, gentle, and yet uneasy smile. Words flowed naturally and rapidly from their lips, rolling along on the torrent so long pent up these past days, and whose sudden rising carried all before it.

"Tell me, Raymonde," said he, "that at least you haven't doubted me for an instant. Perhaps I have been calumniated; that's quite possible—No? Is that so? You knew that an affection like mine was incapable of failing you. If anything could increase it twofold, it would be the knowledge of your unhappiness. There is an irreparable aspect to your grief, and we will not speak of it. Time only will lessen the pain of your sorrow. You know the affection and sympathy that I had for your father, and I have attempted to render a just homage to his memory. If there had been any occasion to do so, I would have defended him with every energy I possessed."

Tears filled Raymonde's eyes. He looked at her with a softened expression and felt a childish desire to kneel at her feet. He continued—

"But whatever can be rectified will be, dear, that I swear. Leave it all to me. Such a woman as you can and ought to smile at adversity. What are material losses, reverses of fortune, when with the wave of a fairy's wand you can remodel your life and make it far happier, more beautiful and more desirable than it has ever been."

"Oh, Mark!" It was a feeble cry of modesty, of bewildered emotion.

"Yes, I know, I am wanting in delicacy of sentiment to speak to you like this at such a moment. Be quite sure that I would not allow

myself to do it if the imperative present permitted us to await the future quietly. Believe me, I am only speaking to you thus because I love you infinitely, with complete devotion, and because I belong to you with all that I represent in appreciable wealth in a world where one only judges men by the power they possess, and—perhaps you know it already—riches are the only power. These riches, Raymonde, I lay at your feet. Do what you like with them. Am I not your best friend? Don't attach to this offer more importance than it is worth. I despise money for itself, the money that my enemies reproach me with having conquered by greed and loving beyond everything else. I only desire to be rich because you may be so too. I would feel myself poor, indeed, if you repulsed me. . . ."

A slight blush coloured Raymonde's cheeks, and her peculiar smile became still more flexuous. In her eyes was reflected that grave and mysterious emotion that love alone, in certain intense moments, imparts to a woman's beauty.

"Dear Mark . . . you know very well that you can do nothing for me." But her blushing face, her quivering eyelids, and the pleasurable feeling of languor that pervaded her whole being, gave the lie to her words. She knew quite well that Mark was in love with her; she had not wanted to doubt him and this assurance delighted her. He appeared to her at this moment with his strong face, his hard eyes full of tenderness, to possess the compelling and superb beauty of the male, the master.

"I can't do anything for you," he protested;

"and who else then will be able to do anything? Do you think that I am wanting to buy you, that I am asking you to be my mistress? I beg you to fully understand me!"

Ah! how much good he was doing her and how grateful she was to him for humiliating her so little and treating her with so much consideration when, she confessed it to herself without shame, he would only have had to utter one word to make her his, a slave only too happy to pay her debt in exchange for all that he was offering her. Bought! Sold! What did these words mean for her since she was in love with him? Let him cover her with jewels afterwards, surround her with all that luxury which she could not do without, as much as he pleased! She would accept everything from him as a brilliant necessity, a golden yoke of vanity. But, for the moment at least, there was certainly no calculation mixed up in her feeling of spontaneous abandonment.

With all her heart she gave him her fervent gratitude. Why? because she was weak and without help against herself or others, unarmed, and a prey to future terrors—for if she had told Gilles of her project of becoming an actress it was only to excite his anger, and she had not quite decided about doing so, as she was much too intelligent not to fear a possible failure—and here was Mark, in his generosity, not seeking to profit by the opportunity which offered when, owing to the exhaustion of both mind and body, she was already at his mercy!

Such are, however, a woman's contradictory impulses, her disingenuousness and her need of

finding out certain things by devious paths, that, sincere in spite of all this, she replied—

“You touch me more deeply than I can express, my dear friend, but remember that I am always Mme. d'Arbelles and do not belong to myself. . . . How can I possibly accept the benefits you offer me without selling myself?”

“My dear Raymonde, your past life is a nightmare that you will forget in the long run. You have already thought of breaking with it, and the moment to do so has come. When your freedom is obtained, you will perhaps condescend to become Mme. Mark Le Vigreux.”

She gazed at him dumfounded. He spoke as though in a dream. Was he sane?

“But, Mark, what about your wife?”

His features hardened with a relentless tenacity and his glance darkened as it did in his stormy hours.

“I want to be your husband, Raymonde, and what is more, I shall be it. Therese will consent to give me my freedom.” He saw the extraordinary astonishment that this révelation caused her, and continued, “You know what she is. She is one of those rare beings whom I know I have treated very badly, but I respect her and have never misjudged her; I can answer for it that she will sacrifice herself.”

“For me, too . . . knowing all?”

“Yes, for you and knowing everything! For me, if you prefer it. Let me explain, dear one. I don't want to propose a false situation which will cause you pain, at least as far as I am concerned. I want to be able to say to you some day—whether

you are free or not—share my whole life with me. It is only on your account that I desire my freedom."

"But I shall never have mine," she murmured sadly; "my husband refuses every kind of separation."

"Listen; you will decide it yourself," said he, in a jovial, swaggering tone of voice; "what a woman wants . . . you know the rest. . . . If necessary, you will seek a divorce."

"What motives?"

"We will find sufficient."

"But he wants me to go with him to his new position."

"You must go with him."

"What! to Batavia?"

"No, to Italy. The consulate at Naples is now vacant, and Gilles will be nominated for the position. The minister cannot refuse me, although it will be looked upon as a scandalous promotion. Well, so much the worse if it is! You will gain several months at Naples,"—he did not say it in so many words, but she guessed that he referred to the period of her mourning—"It is unnecessary to create any talk, there will always be time for that. We will write to each other, and I shall go to see you in Naples, it's only a few hours by express from here . . . we will manage everything . . . then my divorce will be pronounced, and after that you will be mine, Raymonde, won't you?"

"What a wonderful magician you are, Mark, and I am allowing myself to be drawn towards the mirage; but suppose none of these things are realized, what then?"

"Trust me, dearest. Everything succeeds with me because I never have any doubts about myself. I don't entertain a thought as to difficulties. Don't you know that you have only to will a thing to have it? If you walk straight up to people, they draw back. Your husband will be nominated to Naples. In the meanwhile, I don't want the shadow of a care to hover near your beautiful brow. We shall go along hand in hand with a single heart and a common purse. Now, just imagine! How could I have been so thoughtless as not to let Labric know that last winter your father lent me a considerable sum of money, which must be restored to the inheritance. Labric will receive it this evening and, as it is yours by every right, you can dip into it freely."

Could she be the dupe of this stratagem? But the delicate intention flattered her, and that need of finding a refuge in a lie which was necessary in order to reconcile her scruples of conscience with her cowardice of action, enabled her to become it. She didn't trouble to consider that she was allowing her husband, her mother and sister, to participate unknowingly in the moral lapse of the compromise she believed she was alone accepting. The delicious poison, the sweet corruption, took possession of her soul, which but a moment ago, was moved by a disinterested impulse. She saw herself rich, adulated, beautifully dressed, swimming in luxury, with a residence in the Champs-Élysées, and thoroughbreds, fêtes, sparkling jewels, all that was real life to her!

Dazzled by the miracle of beauty which Mark summoned up—if it only became possible!—

she opened her arms to him and held up her lips, moved by a tenderness that both of them knew how to control, because the future would recompense them.

"Mark, I love you!"

"And I love you, Raymonde."

CHAPTER IX

MADAME ELOI LE MARTIN had invited Jeanne Brevier without her daughters (in order to talk more freely as she had written) to luncheon with her, and during the meal the latter had been studying her aunt's puffy face to discover any expression upon it which augured well for her. But she only read there the almost bestial satisfaction of an appetite that an ogre himself would not have been ashamed of.

She said to her niece while they were greeting each other—

"You understand, my dear, that I haven't wanted to go and see you lately because of Gilles. Your son-in-law makes me very angry, and does you a lot of harm. But let us have luncheon first."

With looks of contempt and little snorts of disgust directed at Mdlle. Duverset, who resembled a waxen image, only drank milk, and scarcely touched the numerous dishes, Aunt Eloi had resolutely attacked and bolted down, fried tench, veal cutlets, and ducks served in green gravy. With a sharp tooth she had also attacked a certain number of living personages, for she didn't spare her words, and placed no restraint upon herself. At the same time the process of digestion began to

make itself manifest by two or three loud hiccoughs which she scarcely took the trouble to suppress, even from consideration for her niece, whom she knew to be dreadfully sensitive. Mdlle. Duverset, accustomed to this kind of thing and even worse, had discreetly withdrawn, from the drawing-room, and Mme. Le Martin, propped up in an enormous armchair in which she had the appearance of a huge Chinese idol, looked at Jeanne Brevier with a complacent expression on her face.

All said and done, the disaster of her relatives had not been so painful to her as one might have imagined. She had even found certain inadmissible reasons for rejoicing over it. There is always something laughable about the misfortunes which happen to our neighbours, and when there is no fear for one's self, and we witness their smash-up, even a tragic smash-up, our sense of humour, as well as our inherent taste for cruelty, is satisfied. This was the way Aunt Eløi looked at it, and thus, little by little, the Breviers' catastrophe became a matter of enjoyment to her.

No doubt at first she felt something! . . . because a silly whiff of pride had shown her that the dishonour of this ruin might cast its reflection upon her. However, the safety of her own millions reassured her, and as for public opinion she had long ago "trampled upon that," as she expressed it in one of her *bourgeois* aphorisms. She had been overwhelmed with indignation and anger at Pierre's imprudence and stupidity. But, after this first natural movement, what pleasure she had felt in complimenting herself on her foresight, her

shrewdness! For Hottmann would have been only too glad to try and entrap, from her, too, some good round sums of money, of which she would never have heard another word! But she had "gumption," as she called it, and that's how the sterling houses are built up, whilst those "sieves" of nephews and nieces!—well, for a long time past she had prophesied their end, and *plouf*, here it was!

From the hour that she had seen him die, Pierre's death had left her quite indifferent! She was hoping to see everybody buried! She had only one horror in life, namely, poor relations. If Jeanne should come to ask either assistance or advice, she would send her to the right about. And if, during these early days of their bereavement, she had not hesitated to show her disapproval, it was in order to take defensive measures, like a dog who growls to keep people from the house. But the Brevier's perfect attitude, also the d'Arbelles' demeanour, had not only surprised but pleased her, and, by a return of vanity, stimulated her to act equally well! The notion that they could possibly do without her had seemed very funny to her at first; then she exclaimed out loud to Mdlle. Duverset: "I should very much like to know how they're going to get out of their difficulties without me!" Then she had suffered in her touchy despotism and in her need of humiliating others.

"Well, Jeanne, my dear, what plans have you got? Without wishing to reproach you, I must say you have not shown me any great confidence in all this affair; and since you have put me to

one side, it is I who must interest myself in your doings."

Mme. Brevier, who was fairly well acquainted with her aunt's character, replied—

"You mustn't be angry, auntie dear, with those who are grieving. If they keep apart, it is not only from delicacy of feeling, but because they do not wish to inflict upon others the irksomeness of their sorrows."

"You are quite right to think like that as far as mere acquaintances are concerned. They leave you without any consideration, and you have already had good proof of this. You have also heard, no doubt, a lot of spiteful gossip, because of your prominent social position. These people know they mustn't take liberties with me! But I am sure you must have very quickly remarked how you were left alone at your residence."

Without turning a hair, Mme. Brevier swallowed the bitter words. Aunt Elœi was now her only resource, her last hope. She appeared not to remark the look of horrible satisfaction which overspread that large, fat face.

Mme. Le Martin continued: "But with me, your only relative, my dear Jeanne, did you realize how this apparent coldness—apparent only, I said!"—responding to a movement of protest from her niece—"could give me pain, because, you know, I love both you and your daughters tenderly."

This refinement of hypocrisy threw Mme. Brevier into a cruel embarrassment. She was being reproached for not having done what she never would have been pardoned if she had done.

She caught glimpses of the long series of mortifications which she would have to endure in submitting to her aunt's protection; but necessity is a hard law.

"I am not angry with you," said Mme. Le Martin in a superior tone. "You have never had much aptitude for business, let me say it without offending you, and now in all this you are being guided by your idiot of a son-in-law." She wouldn't allow any interruption. "I know what I am talking about, and if Raymonde makes him . . ."—she uttered the characteristic but shameful word without faltering—"he will only get what he deserves."

"I did everything I could," protested Mme. Brevier, "to prevent Gilles from resorting to these extreme measures."

"He piles one stupidity on the top of another," replied her aunt, sharply; "he has done more to ruin you than that foolish old Pierre, because Gilles consummates your degradation in the eyes of society. What's the meaning of these precipitate sales, as if you were afraid of not having a chemise to your back or a morsel to eat? Everybody is crying out, 'They haven't a farthing; they are actually selling the clothes off their backs!' and of course they leave you severely alone."

"But, my dear aunt, our situation . . ."

"What's all that about your situation? Can't you live upon credit as much as upon real resources? That was Edmond's axiom, and it often saved him from serious scrapes! You can hold your head high and continue your mode of life, deuce take it all, and everybody says to himself, 'As there's nothing broken, let's welcome

them back.' But now, what has happened? Why, the Boyséon's have turned you down and served you with their P.P.C."

"Could I prevent them?"

"Certainly you could. You are not going to make me believe that you would possibly be out in the street to-day?"

"Gilles insisted——"

"I know your affairs as well as I do my own. Am I not to be taken account of? Wasn't I there? If you had confided everything to me, shouldn't I have been able to drag you out of this trouble and prevented you from committing still further stupidities? Money, money! Great heavens, haven't I any left? Do you think it would have embarrassed me to any extent to have made arrangements with Labric, and put at your disposal a million or so of francs if it were necessary? This sum, as a matter of fact, would only have been an advancement of your inheritance, for, at my death . . ."

"Please don't speak of that, auntie dear! If I had only known . . ."

Mme. Brevier was suffering a veritable martyrdom. Nothing would have been easier than to have asked such a favour, affectionately, of a generous relative; but she knew that her aunt was lying to her, lying outrageously, and was ostentatiously giving herself credit for a tardy generosity which would have taken flight there and then, if she had even requested the loan of a thousand francs!

"Well, what is done is done," said Mme. Le Martin, who was enjoying this repulsive comedy.

"Your son-in-law has done for you, and the harm is irreparable. When everything is sold, what is going to become of you; where will you go?"

"I thought it might be as well for Alice and me to board for the time being with the nuns of the Holy Veil who, as you know, have escaped the law dealing with the convents. They have a very comfortable house, very moderate terms, in the Rue du Boule, where we can wait until our affairs are settled."

"And why not go to Sainte-Périne?" exclaimed her aunt, whose whimsical mood was aroused, although she could not face the consequences of such a come-down (not for her nieces—she laughed at them) but for herself! She was thinking of that public opinion upon which she only "trampled" intermittently. "Is your life at an end, then?" she continued; "isn't it enough that already everybody in society is roaring with laughter over your ruin? Do you want Alice to marry a clerk on about eighteen hundred francs a year? And don't you care that it will be said, 'There's that Mme. Le Martin, as rich as a Rothschild, leaving her nieces in a convent where they will be half-starved'?"

"Ah," said Jeanne Brevier. "It is Alice's settlement in life which fills me with uneasiness, as for myself . . ."

"You! . . . you will no more resign yourself, my dear, than any other woman. Don't try to make me believe that story. When one has been rich one cannot give up being it; you are accustomed to luxury and comfort. It is absolutely necessary that Alice makes an advantageous

marriage. Well, am I not here? The Boyséons indeed! The Boyséons! I will easily find you a better match than that; I have exactly what you want. In less than a year Alice will be rolling in her carriage and you will once more take up your pleasant life."

"But Alice hasn't any dowry, dear aunt."

"No dowry? Isn't she beautiful? I know some one who will suit you, I repeat; and do me the pleasure of not thinking any more of the Saint-Voile nuns. Both of you are coming to live with me. You will have what you want and all that you want. Naturally, I don't want to be mixed up with your son-in-law. Let him go to Peru, or Monomotapa, so long as I don't hear any more about him. Raymonde, I suppose, will go with him. I will see that she gets a present, poor girl! Now, come along and look at your rooms; it's all settled." And Mme. Le Martin rose up heavily from her seat, enjoying, without appearing to listen, her niece's thanks, rather too warmly and volubly expressed to be quite sincere. This was indeed the servitude of the conquered, chaired to the steps of the conquerors! Many sick and bitter moments in store, it is true, but at the same time there was the mirage of the huge fortune later on. In the meanwhile! . . .

That same evening, Michel, who had not been seen for a week past on account of having had a rather lively controversy with M. d'Arbelles, who managed to get at loggerheads with everybody, came to ask for news. Mme. Brevier was closeted with Raymonde, talking over all these big plans and also comparing patterns of mourning for new

gowns. Le Vigreux's "restitution," accepted with astonishment, but without displeasure or comments—Gilles alone having frowned in silence—came in very acceptably. Therefore, it was Alice who went downstairs to receive Michel in the drawing-room. Her sadness, and discouragement were visible. The departure of her friend, Florence, had left a dreadful void and the idea of going to live with Aunt Eloi caused her to feel an instinctive repugnance.

She made Michel acquainted with the news and, in so doing, saw a peculiar smile appear upon his face.

"I have been wanting to consult you," said she, raising her eyes to his. "I am all at sea and want to know what I ought to do."

He turned away. Would he dare utter the words which burned upon his lips? Aunt Eloi's offer had brutally upset the castle in the air, which his imagination had been building up. Was there anything astonishing that he felt thus? Mme. Le Martin was about to shelter with her protection, weighted with conditions, these unfortunate women; throw them as alms crumbs from her stolen wealth, her mud-bespattered millions, and the knowledge of this already caused him suffering.

Probably—and a jealous instinct warned him of it—she would try and get Alice married and, if the latter preferred to run this risk, had he any right to dissuade her, for after all, how few human beings ever found happiness? Could he forget that some day she would inherit the wealth of this woman who was swollen out with gold like an abscess with matter?

Should he snatch Alice from her family, from her destiny, he asked himself? No! No! And once more his miserable pride forced him to answer—

"I really don't know anything about it. I haven't any advice to give you."

"Oh! Please!"

"I don't see . . . I don't know . . ."

"Don't you think I could live alone and try to earn my living?"

He hesitated, deeply touched. His beautiful dream returned to him! And suddenly she regained all her power over him. He recognized her such as he loved her—pure, noble, upright. But how could Mdlle. Alice Brevier from one day to another, earn her own living? "Poor child! . . . He glanced at her pretty, soft, white hands, hands which were the result of luxury, and compared them with his own, brown, nervous and rough hands accustomed to handling instruments which hurt and yet cured, also, touching wounds and poison and used to suffering and misery. She, earn her own living! Too late! What could she do? She wasn't properly prepared for anything of the kind. One cannot improvise from one day to the next a destiny, a profession, a livelihood! And then, what would people say? Would they not try to explain such an unusual determination on her part, one quite out of the ordinary, by attributing some unworthy motive to it?

He answered in a sad tone, more tritely than he wished—

"No, I don't think it possible, at any rate, not just at present."

She lowered her head, and did not make any answer, feeling wounded, and above all, deeply troubled. Did he doubt her courage, her sincerity? Did he, then, think so little of her?

Thus, the misunderstanding between them continued. They separated from one another without having been able, or known how, to dispel their mutual heaviness of heart.

THIRD PART

THE best part of life is but an intoxication ; it is either glory, wine, love, or gold, towards which all men direct their hopes. . . .
—BYRON.

CHAPTER I

Six months had passed since the valuable collections and pictures of the Brevier residence had been sold and dispersed under the strokes of the auctioneer's hammer. Judging from the uproar and the crowd of persons present at the sale, who treated it like a first-night performance, more than the sum of three hundred and fifty thousand francs, or thereabouts, had been expected to be realized.

In front of the raised platform, Trac, provided with his well-sharpened pencil, society reporters, and aristocratic women mingled with well-to-do tradesmen and secondhand dealers of valuable articles. During the five days of the sale all Paris had filed through these rooms, gossiping and scandal-mongering to the sound of rustling skirts and the nodding of feathers.

"Those poor Breviers!"

"What, you here?"

"Mon Dieu, yes! I wanted to purchase something. . . . What a mixed lot! Brevier, poor fellow, was no connoisseur of his fellow-creatures."

"And wasn't he well taken in? Any rubbish does for these parvenus."

"Is this sedan-chair really old?"

"If you like to think so."

"I see that Mme. Mérierne isn't with the little Palud any longer. Did you know it?"

"Who is it now?"

"Oh, Jacques Laponge."

"No small boys left for her?"

"Those poor Breviers!"

"Have you seen them since?"

"No. Have you?"

"Oh, you know, visits of condolence always give me an attack of neurasthenia."

"What a fog-horn of a voice that Bentham has! By-the-by, that article isn't going high . . . Awarded!"

"They never would have got out of their fix without Mme. Le Martin."

"Yes, she's behaved very well. But those poor women have got so thin; she doesn't give them enough to eat."

"How wicked you are! Have you heard that Mme. de Cicé is going to be operated on again; this time it is really appendicitis."

"As for me, ever since I have taken to drinking medically prepared *culture* with my food I am more than healthy. It works like a charm."

Lording it over everything, the auctioneer, Bentham, overbearing and smiling, in his false collar, his red regatta waistcoat, and black jacket, was with every tap of his hammer disposing, little by little, piece by piece, of that costly collection, which had been gathered together formerly by dint of hard cash down, and was now being scattered broadcast amongst indifferent spectators and friends of other days.

"How are you, my dear president?" said Dr. Le Dave to M. d'Ygré, who returned—

"And you, my dear master?"

"Plenty of pretty women," answered Le Dave, fixing a new-comer through his eyeglass.

Trying to look reproachful, the judge betook himself off to greet Mme. Aguilano. And still the clarion voice of the auctioneer continued shouting—

"Who will begin at fifteen hundred francs. Fifteen hundred and twenty—thirty. No more bids? Look here, gentlemen, this statue of a bathing girl is worth much more than that. Well, let us say fifteen hundred and thirty."

Every now and then Maître Labric's chief clerk and Maître Aurandon's second clerk offered a bid for certain souvenirs which Mme. Breviër particularly valued. Room was being found for the Princess Sophia, who only came in and went out, with the exclamation, "Ugh, what a set!"

An amused wearisomeness could be read on the countenances; no expression of sadness recalled the fact that the great majority of these curiosity-mongers, who were crowding against and hustling one another and exchanging their smiles and slanders, had once been guests in this house. Maître Vapaille was laughing aloud with Mascarnes, who was sad because he was suffering pain in one of his wisdom teeth, and because his fat, vulgar, jealous wife was rendering his life insupportable to him.

"Look, there's Laroze with that little Solange of the Varieties. Certainly, all the Breviers' friends are here. . . ."

"Yes. Supposing we go and have a glass of beer, eh?"

Only six months, and there, where the former residents had left the impress of their life, its joys and cares, its drama and comedy, from day to day, its invisible thoughts, its evaporated words, its fleeting actions, was already installed in the newly-furnished house the nomad presence of the new-comers—an American family—for whom, in less than six weeks, the upholsterers and others had improvised a show place, which they called a *home*, and who lived there as if they were at the Grand Hotel, with hired servants and meals provided by Chevet.

Only six months since Gilles d'Arbelles, running in with an unusual air of agitation, had said to Raymond—

— "Whom do you think I have just seen? My minister! We are not going to Batavia after all; we are going much nearer. You will never guess. It's a splendid promotion! I am quite sure you will no longer have any reason to hesitate accompanying me. Although the Director of the Consulates is my friend, he will be furious at this favour, which, however, does not surprise me at all. The minister has wished it in memory of your father, so he told me very amiably. You haven't guessed it yet. Naples, my dear! It is sufficiently close to Paris that you needn't suffer at the distance."

With the pride of the functionary, a characteristic peculiarly French, and the vanity of having the position conferred by favour—which he persuaded himself was due to his own merit—his look was animated, and he seemed to have grown in size since

the morning, so proudly did he hold himself upright. In face of this mental poverty, which suspected nothing—so excellently and discreetly had Mark arranged it all—Raymonde not only felt no pity, but experienced a feeling of satisfied revenge. There came into her mouth the delicious taste of treachery, which is the defence of the weak. She allowed herself to be begged and persuaded by him for a long time, and, her consent at last gained, had about it the value of a reasonable condescension, the merit of a submission, which made Gilles think with pride, "Ah, I knew what I was about; with women you have only got to show your will."

They had left Paris at the beginning of March, and installed themselves on the Boulevard Caracciolo, besides hiring a villa at the seaside, near Pausilippo. Raymonde had taken away with her no less than eight trunks.

Thanks to the connivance of M. Trochard, who was writing up reports in which imagination was coloured with the hues of a bright-looking mirage, she had been able, before her departure, to keep up secret meetings with Le Vigreux which, for reasons of prudence, they did not put too close together. The little flat in the Rue Général-Foy had screened their rendezvous three or four times. What with the masterful passion of the man who overwhelmed her with attentions and sought to forestall all her caprices, and the woman's impulsiveness of soul and flesh, hitherto deprived of tenderness, but craving for life and enjoyment, the irreparable had been accomplished.

And only six months had passed that saw

Michel Lorin every morning leaving his tiny flat in the Rue Vavin and walking on foot to the Paul-Bert Hospital, situated in the Gobelins district. He traversed courtyards planted with old desquamated plane trees, skirted gaunt-looking buildings punctured with big glass openings, and passed by nurses clad in their grey cotton uniforms. In his laboratory, the roof of which shone with glass panes, his black skull-cap and long linen working coat awaited him, hanging on a peg. Already his assistant, bent over a microscope, was watching invisible spots between thin layers of glass, spots that leaked out at the slightest touch, and which were the virus of diseases that destroy the skin, disorganize the muscles, and rot the bones. Some old pupils and newly-made doctors brought him patients suffering from special forms of disease; for instance, an old man who had a vinous-looking vegetable growth of a cancerous nature invading his throat; a child attacked with *Kerion Celsi*, a disease which looked as if a huge grey hairy rat had half entered his closely shorn skull. The room next this one was used for experiments with the X-rays. An iron staircase led up to the laboratory on an upper story, with its metal rods, glass tubes, vases, its liquids, opaque or ruby-coloured aqua-marine, topaz; with all the mysterious paraphernalia of chemistry.

Then came the time devoted to consultations. Michel, followed by Dr. Graves, his assistant, with his long and expressive face, resembling that of a red-haired Christ, went into the out-patient's department. Along the big tables, where the principal doctors were seated with their clinical

clerks and surrounded by medical students, defiled a line of children first, then women, and then men. These exhibited the wrecks of their miserable anatomy, unhealthy, flabby-looking, shapeless, in which flourished the poisonous germs that sapped their flesh and produced the frightful results of their corrupt blood. Michel handled coldly and without any feeling of repulsion, with the curiosity of the man of science, these venomous-looking openings, these leprous crusts, these fœtid lumps like bunches of grapes; washing his hands from time to time in sterilized water. On alternate mornings he visited the in-patients' wards and went along the white row of beds with Aumussat, the head physician, a tall Socratic-looking old man who spoke kindly to the patients. Then it was the operating theatre, the lecture room.

He knew every familiar sound of this immense hive, the pattering of the feet along the waiting-rooms, the crowd pressed against the barriers, where the remedies were distributed. He also knew all the strong or faint pharmaceutical odours which mingled the mouldy smell of iodoform with the sharp scent of mustard poultices, and, above all, he could detect that almost indiscernible odour of goose-flesh, like a faded lily in stagnant waters, which emanated from the large, white, clean wards. He knew at what hour the sun would reach the bench where three convalescents were usually seated, resembling weak, comical-looking pierrots in their odd dressing-gowns and cotton night-caps. He loved his hospital and his patients; he loved this studious and austere life.

It was almost with regret that he left it all, at

half-past twelve o'clock in the morning, to swallow down his lunch at a little restaurant near by, where he elbowed stonemasons, who whitened his coat, and cab-drivers, who brought in a smell of the stables on their boots. Unless he had any consultations at his own house, he returned quickly to his laboratory until the hour of his lectures at the Faculty of Medicine. In the evening he studied hard by the light of his lamp.

Days, weeks, months, thus passed. When he had a moment to spare, he thought of Alice with a tender irritability, an obscure pain, hopes so confused that they were like shadows in the night.

Only six months, and the Breviers' servants, amongst them Prosper, his wife, and their niece Rose, had also left the house; the three last having returned to their birthplace to recuperate from their emotions, and hesitating whether to go into service again or to settle down at their ease on their small income, which was the fruit of so many fertile years and daily perquisites. A bitterness often crept into their talk, due to the dissatisfaction felt by officials whose career has been suddenly cut short by a premature superannuation.

Although too old to serve under new masters, both Prosper and his wife still felt themselves active enough to go on living in a prosperous servitude. They suffered at no longer enjoying those halcyon days, when in their life of automatic gestures and obligatory rites, they could gratify that leaven of curiosity and scandal which rendered fatigue light to them, and imparted even to their lives the illusion of vanity and luxury that came from the habit of rubbing shoulders with the rich.

Only six months . . . and save in the hearts of Alice and Michel, the memory of Pierre Brevier had already grown pale and distant ; his wife and elder daughter only thinking of it intermittently and with sudden impulses. He who, during his life, seemed indispensable was no longer so, because the inexorable laws of necessity and time accommodate themselves to the present and to the workings out of fate ; he who had laboured so hard and built up a splendid past, now crumbled away, was resting lifeless in six feet of earth gradually dissolving and disappearing, according to the round of the seasons, the rhythm of the hours during which everything passes away and dies.

His well-known name, his strong personality, and the resounding noise which had been made around his fall, were all forgotten ! Other scandals, other catastrophes, were now filling the press and supplying food for the conversation of society people.

Only six months, and were it not for Alice going regularly to carry flowers to her father's grave in Père la Chaise, nobody would ever have known or cared whether Pierre Brevier had lived or not !

CHAPTER II

It was a beautiful morning in the month of May. In the little sitting-room which she occupied at her aunt's, Alice was seated at a table with a grammar and a dictionary and an English novel (describing wild, dramatic adventures) which she was translating. Her pen ran over the white sheet of paper in a tiny, well-shaded, clear handwriting, which had nothing in common with the bold artificial style adopted by her mother and sister, whose caligraphy was so similar that their letters could have been mistaken for one another's.

She stopped at the end of a paragraph, in which Sir William had just been pitched over a precipice with his motor, under the fear-stricken eyes of his mother-in-law. Alice had grown much paler these past months. An expression of sadness never left her countenance. The emotional crisis which had beset her had rendered her still more silent and reserved. She drew from her blotting-case a letter from her friend Florence, and re-read it slowly. It announced the imminent date of her marriage. James Harrison would remain a cripple all his days, dragging, between crutches, a half-dead limb. He had not wished at first that his betrothed should sacrifice herself to him, but she had insisted, and (so she wrote bravely) she

"thought they were going to be very happy in spite of that." How sad it all was, however! and Alice looked at the likeness of the young man which Florence had sent her, with its vigorous head, frank expression, clean-shaven, combative jaws; all this activity and energy henceforth suppressed, nearly paralyzed. A cripple, oh, what a sad pity!

In words full of affection, Florence made inquiries as to what had become of her friend, and what she proposed doing. She implored her to write a long letter in return for the confidences with which her own was full, and reminded her of the promise made before she left. She also wrote that it was quite probable they might be returning to Europe. Alice thought deeply.

Numberless times since she had received this letter she had dipped her pen in the ink to answer it, and each time her hand had fallen away inert. A feeling of lassitude, which she could not shake off, possessed her. To write a long letter, endeavouring to express her thoughts, seemed beyond her strength. A discouragement, a gloomy torpor weighed upon her brain.

It had not been during the first weeks, but ever since then she had been suffering from the consequences of the painful shock. She wept more for her father now than when the sad event had happened. How much she wanted him! His photograph was beside her on the table where she worked, and but very seldom left her eyes. A deep feeling of homelessness pervaded her whole being. It did not seem to her as if she were really living here, nor that what took place

was actual and true. She had the sensation of floating along in a perpetual dream.

So long as the framework of her life had not been annihilated, and her habits had not been ruthlessly torn from the memory of persons and things, she had the illusion of continuing to be herself. But the disappearance of everything which had been the daily frame of her living entity brought into her existence the void of a second death; she felt no longer bound to the former Alice, and she did not know what kind of a new Alice was being re-incarnated from this uprooted soul and wrecked heart. How much she had suffered under this roof whose shelter she and her mother were receiving, with its strange exhibition of hospitality!

Personally, she had made herself respected by her silent moods and her persistent seclusion. By dint of a firm tactfulness she had imposed her independence upon the old despot who had not been able, however much she wished to do so, to treat her as a butt for her teasing moods, as she did Mdlle. Duverset. But was it sufficient to have preserved her moral freedom at the expense of suffering a veritable torture in the unequal contact with their protectress, who inflicted upon them a thousand pin-pricks?

When her father was alive, Alice had felt a kind of dumb uneasiness in her surroundings. The contrast of her character with that of her mother, and even Raymonde, had been a source of regret to her; but what was that compared with living so close to this woman, who was intoxicated by her wickedly acquired wealth and choked to the

throat with hatred, vanity, cynicism and cruelty? Times without number the young girl had been revolted at the way in which she treated the people surrounding her, or maliciously judged and condemned others, or gave expression to opinions whose base selfishness lowered still more her utter want of a conscience.

What had cost her even more was to observe the efforts of her mother to reconcile at the same time her personal dignity, which was often compromised, and her constantly threatened interests. In this ungrateful task, Mme. Brevier displayed real heroism, the resources of a spirit broken by commerce with the world, the prodigious art of knowing when to remain silent or of risking, during the course of conversation, the stories, with a point to them, which create amusement. She had discovered how not to displease her aunt, who occasionally showed her a sort of grudging affection, the only kind which she was capable of feeling. That her mother should have forced herself to assume this attitude, Alice could understand, if it had to be so; but that Mme. Brevier should preserve it even when alone with her daughter, without an explosion, without a lightning flash of rebellion in her eyes, without once relinquishing that mask of false propriety—that was what she could not possibly understand or explain to herself. Between her and her mother, under an aspect of mutual amiability, it seemed as though an abyss was opening wider and deeper every day, owing to their reciprocal misunderstanding, and the estrangement of their ideas.

But if indeed it were only that! That her

mother, distracted by the thought of poverty, should make an effort to protect herself in the future, that she should be the principal consideration where the inheritance was concerned, and, advised by her aunt, should express the intention of appropriating to herself all that she could recover as a guarantee of her jointure without thought of sharing with her daughters—that these things should be done, well and good! Coming from her, it seemed quite natural to Alice who knew her. The latter also understood that her mother should be devoting herself to the management of her future life, exhibiting uneasiness about speculations and eagerness to make good paying investments when she would have between her hands the remains of their one time great fortune, scarcely six to eight thousand francs income. But that all these preoccupations should be accompanied by such a total forgetfulness of the man she had once loved, with whom she had lived so closely during twenty-seven years, this it was which pierced Alice's heart.

Was it possible that, in the long run, love became a moss-grown habit, that it was so loose a tie it could be broken without a pang? How many times Alice had said to herself, "Mother is thinking of him, sorrowing for him, and if she does not let it be seen, it is from a feeling of shrinking that, almost better than anybody else, I perfectly understand!" But it was not so. Mme. Brevier did not appear very unhappy, and never had she spoken to her daughter about the departed one. One could almost have said that all she had within her to give was being dedicated to the service of Aunt Eloi.

And, as if a physical transfiguration was accompanying this other demoralization, Mme. Brevier was growing stouter. Little by little, the tints of a discreetly applied powder and rouge brightened and enlivened eyes and cheeks, and her unchanging blond hair showed even a more golden hue.

Once more Alice applied herself to the book she was translating, and wrote down, "Mrs. Maxwell, crying for help, aroused some of the neighbours!"

But the misery of the situation penetrated her to the core. She once more glanced over the efforts she had made, the steps she had taken to free herself from the family yoke, in trying to succeed in earning her own living. But what disappointments she had endured! What obstacles she had run up against, what smiles of affected benevolence and refusals, disguised under an aspect of consideration and respect, she had met with! How eager everybody had been to make her understand that, what was all very well for the daughter of a poor workman or some unknown poverty-stricken University professor, could not possibly suffice, without a kind of disgrace, for the daughter of ~~M. Brevier~~, one-time co-director of The Four Seasons!

First she had gone to the very concern to which her father had given up the best part of his life, and all his devotion. Roy-Chancel was no longer in it, had sunk under himself, amidst a babel of recriminations justified by his ignorant maladministration.

A provisional manager had been appointed, one of the leading men in the business, who had been longest in it, a tall old man, strong and rugged as an oak, with hands and feet like the stumps of a

tree. A greyish, moss-like beard descended to his waist.

He had cast on Alice a suspicious look from under his bushy eyebrows, and very different from former times, without any of that obsequiousness which he used to show towards the family of his former chief, he had answered her request with an assumed brusqueness of the rustic.

"What are you thinking of, Mademoiselle? The honourable and respected name of your father cannot figure on our wage-sheets in a humiliating employment. What are the women who work for us? Saleswomen, inspectresses, clerks, stenographers and typists. Is it possible for you to occupy any such position as one of those? When a young lady has your name, your beauty, and belongs to society, she cannot adopt any such calling. And I am quite sure your mother would never consent to it."

"You forget, Monsieur, that I am of age."

"But don't you see that I should be reproached with sowing strife in your family? No, Mademoiselle, there is nothing for you to do here, and nothing we can give you to do."

Moiraud rose up to put an end to the interview. In his last words he had revenged himself for old hatreds, and a relentless jealousy conceived towards Brevier—the hatred of a commonplace character, who has vegetated long years as an underling. And Alice, with cheeks deeply flushed, got up and went straight out, feeling so wounded, so completely routed, that only when she got to the bottom of the staircase did she remember the request she particularly wanted to make, which was to ask for the

position of superintendent at the children's home. The actual holder of the position, the widow of a floor-walker, had just received her dismissal, due, as always, to changes in the management, which invariably brings down heavy blows on the employees.

But the step that she took to gain it, by applying to some old friends, members of the Committee of Management of The Four Seasons, also failed. Whether a cloud hovered over the memory of her father, or whether ingratitude went hand in hand with servility, whatever the reason might be, they did not want her. She remembered their homage in the past, the spines bent low before her, and Moiraud was one of those who had bowed the lowest.

She had sought some task to fulfil. What did she know, she asked herself, what services could she render, what gifts or faculties utilize? Could she give lessons for two francs an' hour, and to receive this fee hold out a hand wearing an ill-fitting glove, cleaned with benzine? And, like so many unfortunate women, jump into omnibuses whilst raising her mud-stained skirts from the wet streets? It would not even be bread assured, a decent poverty.

Without having undertaken her examination for the first-class certificate—her mother having withdrawn her from the Sévigné College before she could obtain it—what could she pretend to do? Teach the alphabet to little children in some village, through some one's influence? The fine arts? Although she felt their beauty, she was incompetent to express it. Musician she was, but she did not

know how to go about gaining her living in a profession already so crowded, that pianoforte teachers were easily found who gave lessons for one franc an hour. The stage, as Raymonde had said from bravado? Even if she had been gifted with the greatest talent, and such was certainly not the case, she would not have been able to resign herself to the compromises, the promiscuity of a life which, honourable enough in some rare instances, was only for so many women a passport to a fast life . . .

Ah! The saddening humiliation! To be possessed of brains, and not be able to profit by them! To have hands and not know how to give them any work to do! Dressmaking? Millinery? The least little trashy apprentice could exhibit more capability than she, because, although possessed of far less taste, her fingers, pricked all over by the needle could go on working unceasingly.

She had a glimpse then of the deceptive inferiority of the young girl who has been trained for a life of luxury, and is good for nothing, except to figure as an object of show, like a valuable doll. She began to understand the difficulties of a period of transition which condemns so many women to work for a living, and only offers them in exchange for their labour, callings with humble salaries, invaded by hosts of applicants; or the higher professions, almost inaccessible, because they are so little to the taste of the feminine character, which is not quite adapted to them yet.

The law? She had been solemnly received in M. Leloup d'Ygré's private office. Maître Vapaille, passing out of it, had not bowed to her because of

his surprise at finding himself face to face with her. The president had pointed her to a sombre-looking chair of green leather, and, with an icy manner, had waited with an expression of curiosity for her to explain the cause of her visit.

"You want my advice? Why, certainly, Mademoiselle, it is my duty not to refuse it to you. Besides, my age . . . and also my experience . . ."

But when she began to sound him as to the chances a woman might have to make a position for herself, if not at the bar—as she did not feel she possessed the gift of eloquence—but in an office, as a consulting lawyer, he stroked his whiskers with his bony fingers and eyed the young girl severely from head to foot.

"Oh, Mademoiselle," he answered, "I ask you whether you really consider this is the kind of profession for a woman—these arid and serious studies which are not exacting too much in requiring of a young man the most complete mental equilibrium, studious application, and a considerable memory joined to a penetrating, subtle, far-seeing intellect? Truly, I should employ every argument to dissuade you from such a step. There is one far simpler, more beautiful and more appropriate for your sex. The rôle of a woman, Mademoiselle—and should I be the one to remind you of it?—is inseparable from the hearth, marriage, children. Ah! you will cite me in the profession, on the subject of which you have done me the honour to consult me, certain exceptions; they are too few, however, for us to draw any conclusion from them, but I would not like, Mademoiselle, to see you exchange your present style of gown for the

toga of the advocate—you would certainly lose by it."

These last words, which caused a blush to mount to Alice's face, brought the conversation to an end. In the neighbouring room, Mme. Leloup d'Ygré's dry, cold voice could be heard, directing the piano practice of her daughter. The judge did not propose that Alice should see his wife; he had been shocked, and did not augur well from her having taken such a free step. He thought that young women were trained very badly nowadays, and made up his mind that henceforth his "home" would not be open to this particular one.

Medicine? One day Alice had seen enter the little parlour of the Children's Home, Dr. Le Dave—who for three months past had not deigned to leave a card upon them—and was now very eager, very amiable in his manner, evidently desirous of overcoming Alice's marked coldness. Although still reserved, she had profited by the opportunity to ask him some questions. Was the profession of medicine forbidden to a young girl of her age, she asked simply, a girl of twenty-one years? Would he advise her to take it up?

He looked at her with a quick fear, an incredulity, which turned to a smile.

"Why, Mademoiselle," he answered, "your medical studies alone would not take you less than five or six years. Have you matriculated and taken your examination in physical science, chemistry and botany, etc.? You haven't? Well, that alone will take up two years. Afterwards come the examinations," and he counted them off on his fingers. "In anatomy, physiology, pathology,

therapeutics, clinical tests, a thesis to write, and, if you want to take up a hospital clerkship in medicine and surgery, that will last another four years, making eight years in all ; at least ten years will be necessary for you to give up before you will be able to exercise the right of practising a very uncertain and overstocked profession, and which"—here Le Dave threw out his chest—"is allied to a very lofty philosophy and a practical and painful form of life for which a woman is badly prepared. You, a doctor ! I must acknowledge I can't see you as such." And with an expressive motion he cast on one side such a ridiculous supposition. Then, drawing closer to her, with a leer upon his face, his eyes suddenly suffused, and stroking his pomaded lock of hair, he continued in a lowered voice, "No, Mademoiselle, you must leave such work as that to plain women—without wishing to give offence to my feminine colleagues. To hear a pretty woman pronouncing a barbarous jargon," and he gazed at Alice's mouth, "to see her soil her delicate fingers in repulsive manipulations," he squinted at Alice's ungloved hands, enveloped her with a look which passed from her hips to her neck and ran down the length of dress to her finely shod feet. "No, it is an inadmissible idea. When one is young and beautiful, and possesses a figure like yours, Mademoiselle Alice, there is no need to be uneasy about the future !"

The girl instinctively drew back. He was almost touching her, with a moisture upon his temples, something slimy-looking about his face. An atmosphere of impurity emanated from all his respectable-looking being.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured with passion. "If you only wished . . . you could be rich from one day to another with such eyes and such a figure!"

"Monsieur!"

"Listen to me. It rests with you alone—I am in love with you!"

He made a bold movement towards her, which confirmed his avowal.

"You scoundrel!"

She repulsed his brutal touch, recovered her *sang-froid* when she had hold of the door-handle, and from there, spitting out her disgust, she exclaimed—

"You are an ignoble creature!"

Sick with indignation, she rushed precipitately from the place. This man, whom they had received so many years in their home as a friend, this a civilized man, highly thought of everywhere!

Only at the remembrance of this shame, Alice gave a sudden start. She made an effort to continue her work. What was the good of brooding over all her disappointments; work was far better than sterile regrets, vain dreams! Once again she inclined her head and wrote down, in French, "The butcher was running fast with his," etc.

She was feeling happy that a big evening newspaper was taking this story as their *feuilleton*, it meant five hundred francs for three months' work. Such a means of livelihood was certainly not enough by the end of the year, and she thought quite seriously of preparing for her examinations or seeking a position as a factory inspectress.

Morande had promised her his support, but she could not present herself for it under less than four years, and from now until then . . . !

From now until then Aunt Eloi and her mother quite counted on her being married. Very decided references had already been made in this direction, and they had even ventured to mention a particular person. But she had replied with so much sorrow in her voice, "Oh! not just now. Do you imagine I can think of anything else than my dear father's death?" that, by common agreement, her mother and her aunt left her alone. It was only a respite, however.

Her thoughts turned to Michel, and she asked herself why they never saw him now. Was he forgetting her, then? This idea made her discouragement still greater, and yet the spring was laughing in the avenues, the chestnut trees were swelling and spreading out their big green leaves, and she saw that the sky was blue when she leaned from her windows and looked at it. She heaved a deep sigh with all her restricted youth, her sorrowing melancholy.

Was she, perhaps, wanting in courage? Possibly she also was being 'sucked down into the quicksands of these comfortable surroundings, which induced a sort of languid torpor. If they had been poorer, would she not have been literally forced to earn her bread?

"Now then, go ahead!" And this time she replunged into her work, and her rapid pen courageously traced in fine characters the adventures of Sir William Aster, and the reflections this gentleman made, when, after his giddy fall,

he found himself, dizzy but still alive, having been stopped in his headlong flight by the branches of a tree which had caught his coat and projected him on to a mossy bed at the bottom of the precipice.

CHAPTER III

"Stop here, Eugène," ordered Mme. Le Martin, on their arrival at the lake. The chauffeur obeyed, and the motor gently slowed down. A tall footman, in plush breeches and top-boots, who sat with folded arms and an air of funereal weariness behind the horseless vehicle, leapt to the ground and opened the door. The huge woman alighted, followed by Mme. Brevier, who looked very distinguished in her semi-mourning.

"Here, Baptiste, take Kiki with you; you will wait until you are required, and keep Kiki on your lap, he suffered from pains last night."

The tall footman received the snarling lapdog with a paternal-looking smile. With the gait of a tortoise the motor began to follow about fifty yards behind. In his chocolate-coloured livery, Eugène, the chauffeur, fiercely moustached and with his prominent chest, ogled the few passers-by, scorning to look at nursemaids. When his glance returned to the massive shadow of Mme. Le Martin, an expression of hatred distorted the face of this well-nourished ex-workman, corrupted by contact with the vices of another social caste than his own. He pursued her with a glassy eye, the veritable assassin's look. Impassive, with Baptiste once more in the seat beside him, Eugène, tired of appealing to

the dog's good feelings, began to amuse himself by pinching it on the sly, and squeezing its throat almost to suffocation. When away from his mistress's bedroom or sitting-room, Kiki was subject to such maltreatment!

Every day, after breakfast, Mme. Le Martin made the tour of the big lake on foot, for the sake of her health, and, to the great relief of Mdlle. Duverset, Mme. Brevier had offered to accompany her, once and for all. The change of air did her good in her life of seclusion, and it was generally her aunt's best hour, when she showed more amiability.

The sun lay warm upon the fresh young turf, and the trees blossomed forth in all the intoxication of their whirling sap, whilst the waters of the lake shimmered with bluish-green and russet tints. On the pathways, swept like a floor, a few pedestrians walked about; there was an elegantly dressed couple, the woman not in her first youth, the man with grey hair and black moustache, both of whom went by quickly with a sort of military step. German nursery governesses—*fräuleins* with red hair and wearing glasses—accompanied children, the little girls in big hoods and small boys in long leather gaiters, some of them ruddy with good health, others with pale, anæmic-looking complexions. An occasional carriage passed along, and, in the equestrians' row, two army officers trotted by on horseback. Until two o'clock of an afternoon the Bois remained more or less empty. At the corner of a road a gardener was dragging on wheels his long serpentine india-rubber water-sprinkler, whilst a wheel-barrow crunched the gravel.

"Have you noticed," asked Mme. Le Martin, "what a face your daughter makes whenever I mention M. Lelubert? It's really time, however, that she deigned to think seriously of getting settled."

"It's my dearest wish, as you know," replied Mme. Brevier.

"I dare say; but you haven't sufficient authority over her."

"She has always been like that. Even as a child she used to oppose me with that force of inertia she possesses; it's not an active revolt, but something silent and calm——"

"In my time," interrupted Mme. Le Martin—"and I am speaking of when I was thirty years of age—I used to obey my mother, do you know, like a little girl, and she would have boxed my ears and pulled me by the hair if I had resisted. When I was fifteen she still whipped me. Everybody in the house trembled when she spoke, and I can tell you it succeeded all right."

Mme. Brevier smiled. "I wasn't able to bring up my children like that. If Alice yields to our arguments it will be from reflecting over them, because she is quite reasonable, and knows that you only desire her happiness."

"Of course, of course. What's her idea? Is she so simple as to believe that she will always be able to earn her own living? I fancy, my dear, that I can trust myself to see after your actual necessities. Doesn't she find herself comfortable under my roof?"

Mme. Brevier asked herself if she ought not to attribute the peevish sharpness of her words to the

appearance on the table that morning of Brussels-sprouts, grated with cheese, on which her aunt doted, but which was very bad for her digestion. However, she did not stop to ascertain the cause of her susceptibility to-day. Evidently, if her aunt lodged and protected them—an inestimable advantage, to which she was fully conscious she owed the gradual return of public opinion in their favour—it was not in order that Alice should leave them some day, to go away and live the life of some poor employee or forewoman, for, outside very mediocre callings, how could she possibly be sure of even the most frugal form of independence? And, besides, whatever would people say? She was obliged to acknowledge that Alice showed, in all this, a very disobliging attitude towards their benefactress, and anything but an amiable one towards her own mother, who was so perfect a specimen of her kind.

“I believe, my dear aunt, that Alice does not wish to burden you always with keeping her if, unfortunately, she does not care about marrying.”

“Not marry? What else is she good for? Of what mortal use, I put it to you, is a woman if not to get married? For there are not a hundred ways of fashioning one's life. It's either marriage or nothing; for surely Alice hasn't got her head so turned by these new-women theories—which she'd much better leave alone, anyway,—as to think of forming a free-love union?”

“Oh, aunt, how horrible! Alice isn't insane, you can be persuaded of that; and if you but introduce her to an agreeable husband, I feel sure that——”

"Well, well! Wouldn't M. Lelubert be good enough for her, by chance?"

"Then you consider this young man all right—you can answer for him?"

Certainly, she thought to herself, her aunt was right; marriage was the only resource which could ensure Alice's welfare and an independent life. Frankly, she could not picture her sitting in a commercial office, writing letters, or adding up columns of figures; or, dressed in black, selling articles in a fancy dealer's shop, and saying, "This, madame, is what is being worn the most this season. We have also a large variety of the best tulle——" No, when one has the blood of the La Tourves d'Ayglades in one's veins, one doesn't debase oneself to such modes of gaining a living.

Jeanne Brevier could not forget that it had wanted all the extreme poverty of her youth, menaced with a nun's life when she was in the fullness of her rich, ripe young womanhood, to reconcile her to her husband's trade, imbued as she was with the scorn of commercial life which, in her eyes, was a kind of degradation. For she classified careers according to a hierarchy of her own creation. Merchant princedom was worth more than retail trade, politics was higher still; then, above that again, the judge's bench and the army, and she suppressed a sigh in remembering M. de Boyséon. But to have an income without doing anything represented to her the highest ideal of all.

"Know Lelubert?" Mme. Le Martin answered. "Of course I know him. Didn't I see him come into the world?"

"You have never spoken of him to us before."

"He is only just returned from warmer climates, where his health retained him a long time."

"His health?" asked Mme. Brevier, alarmed.

"Yes, he isn't a showman's hercules, although he is a very nice-looking young man, and distinguished in his appearance, but all the same a little weakly in health. Now, look here, my dear," she said, in answer to a look on her niece's face, "don't be too difficult to please; you haven't got the right to be. The men who are ready to marry a young girl without any dowry are not growing on every bush in these days; and young Lelubert is very rich—he has an income of seventy to eighty thousand francs at least."

"It would be our salvation," escaped from Mme. Brevier; "but health also counts for something. What do you think it is, exactly; is it his chest or his heart?"

"He has been in a decline; just a touch of tuberculosis, but he is now cured. When young men live a little too fast, you know——"

Mme. Le Martin lowered her voice, her smile became ugly, and her expression sardonic. Her face assumed that equivocal look which is seen on the countenances of a certain class of old women when they get talking on ticklish subjects. During these explanations, Jeanne Brevier shrank within herself, and drew herself together with a little shiver of repulsion, a movement of fear and horror. She had the feeling of something dangerous and uncertain, something unclean. Were such distempers ever pardonable? She did not mean to expose Alice to any such peril, however strong

might be her desire to see her daughter settled. And supposing children were born? Madame Le Martin multiplied the reassuring signs of restored health.

"Look here, tuberculosis nowadays isn't anything. Pshaw! They have only to take care of themselves, and, as for these other little accidents, they can be without consequences! You can make up your mind to this, that if the doctors think well of it, and don't oppose his doing so, Lelubert can marry all right. I repeat that the young man doesn't enjoy robust health, but, to put things at their worst, Alice wouldn't be any less well off as a young widow than any other. He would provide a big capital for her in the marriage settlement, as a matter of course, for he has no relatives."

Her aunt said all this with such a natural air, that Mme. Brevier could not refrain from thinking how formidable she was with her thick breadth of shoulders, her heavy, clammy eyelids, her aggressive, swollen face. In the clear daylight and soft atmosphere of early spring, she moved slowly along, like a huge, peaceably-disposed monster.

"But," she ventured to ask, "if that's the case, why was he not married before now? There is no lack of young girls who would not demand any better than that."

"You can make yourself quite easy on that point, and it will not be long before you have a chance of seeing him. He is returning from Syria, where his father made an immense fortune in business. His mother, a Levantine, and twice the size of me, is dead. He has no mother-in-law, and therefore no foreigners to bother him, and that's a good thing."

"No doubt," said Jeanne Brevier, thoughtfully ;
"but——"

Once more she felt a bitter disappointment. What had she been hoping, then? For a prince, charming, handsome, rich, who, with the rapidity of a stroke of lightning, would have fallen madly in love with Alice? And just on the top of the Boyséon disaster, too? As if she didn't know life and human beings better than that. Alice, depreciated, could now only depend upon her beauty. Possible husbands, sufficiently disinterested to marry her without a dowry, would only do so because some personal blot upon their origin, or their health or age, would limit their exactions. Her daughter could not, however, marry an old man, it would be revolting, abject; and besides, Alice herself would never consent to it . . . then a young man . . . well, all husbands are not necessarily robust, and if this one were now completely cured, this unknown son-in-law, why should she wish him any harm, any more than good?

And she was astonished to feel darkly gliding into her thoughts the inadmissible insinuation that her aunt had let fall. The next moment, and she had the vision of Alice, rich and freed, able to begin her life all over again in her own way. She felt ashamed of herself; no, even with that certainty ahead, such a marriage was not the one which would be suitable. That good, honest Pierre would never have consented to it, and she could almost believe she heard his angry indignation, and see him standing before her full of reproach.

"Let him come," said Mme. Le Martin, "that doesn't bind us to anything, and if, as I believe it

possible, he falls in love with her, you will see the thing come about."

"Great heavens!" Jeanne Brevier exclaimed, "not surely without saying anything to Alice?" And she thought to herself, "What a misfortune it is that Aunt Eloi will not give her a dowry, as if it would ruin her;" and she abused her as an old miser. But there was nothing to hope for in that direction; she had left no shadow of doubt as to that. If only this young man were morally all right! It would be necessary to learn something about him—to study him, and get to know him. It wasn't a thing to settle in a five minutes' discussion. Eighty thousand francs income, actually at that moment! It was an unhopèd-for chance, and he might possibly be a very gentlemanly fellow. Alice at least would have a prospect of material happiness with him, that which pays for dresses, jewels, pleasures of all kinds—she hesitated for a moment before the completed logic of her thought—the happiness which is bought and sold!

"Why, certainly," said Mme. Le Martin; "would you like me to invite him to dinner on Saturday?" And, in order to remove her niece's last scruples, she continued, "If you don't care for him, I will think of somebody else; but I am almost sure you will like him."

She did not add that the rôle of benefactress was galling her already on account of her unsettled moods, and that it wouldn't be unpleasant for her to see her house free once more, and Mdle. Duverset trembling again before her. She appreciated beforehand the day and the hour when she would no longer have to put herself out about anything,

or have any spectators of her doings outside her servile domestics, her terrorized lady companion, and Kiki, sometimes gorged with bon-bons and at others locked up in a cupboard.

Their walk round the lake having finished, Mme. Le Martin and Mme. Brevier once more got into the motor.

"Excellent weather for driving," said the aunt, "so we will take a turn to Pré-Catalan, and return by the waterfall." She touched the chauffeur with the tip of her parasol. "Do you hear, Eugène? Now, go slowly."

A mournful despair lengthened the chauffeur's features. Now it was one mile an hour! . . . They might as well drive in a cab! . . . Baptiste, motionless, with eyes fixed straight in front of him, and distended cheeks, was enjoying this dumb rage. He took things philosophically.

"We shan't run any one down going like this," said Mme. Le Martin in a tone of spite.

Eugène bent his back, and put his hand convulsively on the steering-wheel. That last was said, he knew, because of what happened the other day when, precisely because they were jogging along in this way, they nearly skidded, although no harm was done, on account of an electric motor running at lightning speed, which fled past them with scarcely a sound of its horn, and he had thought to himself, "I have plenty of time." Ah, that was something like! To dash along in that way, let who would be crushed beneath the wheels! One is either a chauffeur or not!

Mme. Le Martin could not see Eugène grinding his teeth with suppressed rage, nor Baptiste's

congealed smile; only their brass livery-buttons, at the bottom of their humiliated backs, blinked at her with their shining and sarcastic-looking eyes.

Kiki, seated on her knees, whined pitifully in order to let her know of the bad treatment he had been receiving; "probably the pains of the night before which had returned to him."

Mme. Le Martin kissed him several times on the nose, whilst Mme. Brevier, sitting bolt upright, absent-minded, was thinking in her lofty way, "Madame Lelubert, Alice Lelubert . . . well, there were worse names than that to be encountered!"

CHAPTER IV

It was not without some degree of apprehension that Mme. Brevier saw Saturday dawning. Her thoughts were tinged with sadness, and the memory of her husband pursued her. The feeling of her maternal responsibility gripped her, and in a sudden revival of her integrity she was possessed by a sentiment of revolt against a marriage concluded under such auspices. Then, again, the difficulties that she looked forward to discouraged her beforehand. How could she tell Alice the truth? Mme. Brevier scarcely dared to look her daughter in the face, because this idea caused her such an uneasy feeling.

She had tried to surmount what was perhaps only a prejudice; there was still a blemish that remained persistently in her mind. Although she conceived no immediate fear, yet she could not throw off an obsession she felt about the past. Her medical ignorance exaggerated her dread of this. No, however passionately she might desire to see Alice make a wealthy marriage, she could not possibly consent to her being sacrificed to it. But so great, however, were her ambitions and her pride, that it would have been with the utmost difficulty she could have resigned herself to the contemplation of an ordinary marriage, whatever

might be the moral worth of a suitor—supposing it were Michel, for instance!—the last of those remaining of whom she could think.

For this reason she watched with impatient anxiety for the appearance of M. Lelubert into the drawing-room, to note whether his physiognomy or person would betray any accusing signs. She was agreeably surprised to see a young man with a rather nice figure, a very white skin, and a delicate moustache. A certain impression of fatigue was conveyed by his eyes, surrounded with a dark circle, and by the drooping shoulders of his slenderly-built frame.

M. Lelubert bent very low before the two ladies. Alice's entrance, which preceded by a few moments the announcement that dinner was ready, seemed to take away, so great was his surprise, the few means he had at his command. It was evident he had not expected to meet such a beautiful-looking creature, and his first stammering words betrayed the effect of his surprise. Scarcely was he seated than he almost let his eyeglass fall into his soup. Mme. Le Martin looked at him with an encouraging hauteur, and, in order to put him thoroughly at ease, began speaking of his travels.

"You have made some beautiful trips, it seems," she said.

"Yes, indeed, Madame."

"Through some magnificent countries?"

"Yes, . . . Madame." And, as if he were frightened at hearing the sound of his thin little voice, he almost thrust his face into his dinner-napkin.

Mme. Le Martin began speaking of his father.

Turning to her niece, she explained that Edmond (her husband) had been a school friend and comrade of M. Lelubert's father and had always held him in great friendship. Mme. Brevier could not help remarking to herself that it was probably not such an extraordinary recommendation, for although the words could not be taken as otherwise than a compliment, the young man's embarrassment increased in an alarming way. Just then her aunt shot a severe look at Mdle. Duverset, who took the hint and turned the conversation on to a piece of news concerning a mysterious murder which was filling the daily papers. In this way she served as a kind of living gazette to Mme. Le Martin, who read very little herself, and therefore often made Mdle. Duverset responsible for what the newspapers reported or invented.

"What do you think of it, M. Lelubert?" she asked him.

It was the case of an old man, retired and well-off, who had been found at the bottom of a stone-quarry with his arms bound tight, his pockets turned inside out, and three terrible wounds, any one of which would have killed an ox.

"I think such a suicide is very much to be regretted."

"What, suicide? You surely don't imagine that the unfortunate man——"

M. Lelubert turned extremely red. "I thought you were alluding to that tobacco-seller, who committed suicide by swallowing a decoction of lucifer matches."

"Ugh! what a horrible death!" exclaimed Mme. Le Martin. "Won't you take a little more of that

German ham? Have you been to any of the theatres yet?"

The young man confessed, with some show of caution, that the Comédie-Française bored him and that the Opéra-Comique put him to sleep. He preferred the hippodrome and the music halls. Moreover, his health obliged him to retire early, as he had a slight cough, and the doctor recommended him to be careful.

Alice was more or less amusing herself, for it had not been difficult for her to guess that M. Lelubert was not invited without a secret design. She felt the eyes of this poor young man fixed upon her again and again as if magnetized, but if she looked at him he immediately seemed ready to disappear under the table.

Mme. Brevier, thinking to give a pleasanter turn to the conversation, asked him whether he intended to remain some months in Paris.

"Ye-s, I don't . . . very likely" . . . it will depend . . ."

"M. Lelubert has decided to stay with us," interrupted the aunt in a voice full of assurance. "His interests in the East won't retain him any longer, and where else in the world can one live better than in Paris, when one is as comfortably well-off as he is?"

Her guest's face expanded. Yes, indeed, Paris with an income! . . . Only, he hoped that the cares which the management of a big fortune exacted would not be too complicated, because that would make his head ache. Perhaps he did wrong to drink Chablis? The doctors never ceased to insist upon a particular diet, and no excesses of any kind.

Mme. Brevier was thinking, "He isn't worse than another, he hasn't a consumptive-looking appearance; a little seedy, perhaps, but that may be due to the long journey. But he seems highly nervous."

Mme. Le Martin did not succeed in making her guest shine conversationally, although they spoke of one thing after another, horses, hunting, picture exhibitions, motors, etc. However, his manner had become a little more self-assured after having discovered that the best way was not to look at Alice; but it seemed to him as if he had a thread attached to his head, and that this thread drew it slowly and constantly until he had once more met the serious and unfathomable eyes of the young girl.

She surpassed his dreams, he did not dare allow his wishes to rise to her! Was he asleep, or was he awake? Was it he, and was it she, who were the persons in question? He began to understand those mysterious references made by Mme. Le Martin on his first visit to her, and previously in letters she had sent him to various stopping-places on his way home, for instance—

"You must get married . . . we will find some one for you. . . . What would you say to a beautiful young girl whom I know? She would bring you her beauty and her devotion; what dowry is worth as much as that? Aren't you rich enough for two?"

A dowry! He didn't care about that, he had more money than he knew how to spend; only he was sorry he didn't possess a stronger chest. But his solitude weighed upon him, and when one is ill, mercenary attendants were not . . . ! But

surely she would not look at him! This thought made him suddenly feel self-pity, and he examined his dessert-knife with an abstracted expression, as if he were wondering whether it were really hall-marked silver.

"Where are you living?" asked Mme. Brevier, just as Mdle. Duverset was hesitating about bringing forward a new subject, that of the discovery of a terribly explosive powder, of which the secret was only known to the inventor, who, unfortunately, had killed himself while handling it and destroyed a block of buildings as well.

"He will come and live in this part," asserted Mme. Le Martin with conviction, "it's one of the healthiest in Paris." And she saw exactly what it would be with this tall, weakly young man, with his hesitating will, which it would be necessary for him to forfeit, thus allowing her to manage the affair and bring it to a triumphant conclusion.

"I will find you what you want. You can't remain at a hotel."

"No," he agreed, "there's too much noise and too many people." Then, the thread having suddenly turned his head in Alice's direction, he looked at her with a foolish smile. But this time she only felt pity for him, she was no longer amused in the least.

"I will tell you of a notary and give you the name of my house-furnisher and carpet-dealers," said the aunt. "Trust yourself to me and you won't be robbed." And, whilst looking at him, she thought, "Your appearance is pretty badly mortgaged; fortunately, the summer is coming on." And profiting by a moment when Alice had left the

room, after M. Lelubert had been taken with a little fit of coughing, short and sharp, which stained his cheeks red and piteously drew down the corners of his mouth, she said, "You've got a cold, my dear boy; I must send you my doctor."

"Did you know that Dr. Le Dave was in the South, my dear aunt?" said Mme. Brevier. "Michel will look after M. Lelubert carefully. I will give you his address. He is Dr. Lorin, a friend of ours, the godson of my husband."

She knew that Michel would tell her the truth, and quickly she wrote his name down on a leaf which she detached from a block-sheet of paper, then handed to him. M. Lelubert, confused, thanked her while he breathed with difficulty. He appeared comforted by Alice's absence; on her return, she was tapped on the cheek by her aunt, who begged her to give them some music on the piano. She smiled slightly as she said, "I fancy that music will send M. Lelubert to sleep."

"Oh! Mademoiselle, usually, yes . . . but not when it is you who. . . ." He got entangled in his compliments, and could not free himself, but remained, Medusa-like, with fixed eyeballs.

"What would you like me to play, Monsieur?"

"Oh, I don't mind what it is, Mademoiselle; it's all the same to me. . . ."

"Would you like one of Beethoven's sonatas?" And she played the "Moonlight Sonata." So deep was the charm of this music that a sentiment of poetry and reverie passed through this drawing-room, which was filled with sad thoughts, ugly wishes, and wealth evilly obtained. The aunt beat time with her foot whilst Mme. Brevier suddenly

had a sentimental expression on her face. M. Lelubert listened without understanding and without feeling anything at all, but the noise was pleasant to him, and he looked at Alice with a kind of frightened joy, a rapturous dread. . . .

Certainly, it was a question of her and him! Mme. Le Martin's more than benevolent and abetting smile signified as much, and Mme. Brevier herself did not seem to have any hostility to him. . . . Could it be possible? And this beautiful young girl. . . . No, it was too much to expect! Already three marriages had fallen through at the last moment without any good and valid reason, excepting that he had been given to understand that his health? . . . Great heavens! So long as he didn't suffer from insomnia that night! Insomnia was so lugubrious because the brain works, and works and manufactures all kinds of ideas in the darkness of the night. . . . He would insist upon having a nightlight, and then there was his chloral!

Alice rose from the piano, and he thanked her awkwardly and soon after began to take leave, but Mme. Le Martin insisted upon his waiting for the tea, which would be served very hot. She was going to have him taken to his hotel in her motor, a prospect which seemed somewhat to alarm him, but she would take no denial. "Yes, yes, you have got a little cold, and it will be ever so much better for you."

These last minutes left them all feeling strangely embarrassed. Every subject of conversation had been exhausted, and M. Lelubert seemed not to be able to make the slightest effort. He limited himself to raising every now and then to Alice a look

of misery and shame. Fortunately Mdlle. Duverset announced that the motor was ready, and the young man precipitately fled from the room.

"He's a charming young man," said the aunt, "only his journey has somewhat tired him."

Mme. Brevier nodded her head, while Alice, with a distant air, turned over the leaves of a book containing some Italian views.

"You have made such a strong impression upon him, my dear niece, that the poor fellow is quite overcome by it."

Alice closed the book with a firm hand, and looked first at Madame Le Martin, then at her mother, full in the face, and Mme. Brevier was obliged to lower her eyes.

CHAPTER V

THE next day, M. Lelubert, who had an appointment with the aunt to go with her and look over some flats, did not appear at the hour fixed upon. One of the hotel-porters brought his apologies with a magnificent bouquet of roses: "The gentleman had been taken so ill during the night that a doctor, who had been aroused to give him treatment, had forbidden him to go out, and had applied cupping-glasses."

Mme. Le Martin examined the label which was attached to the bouquet, and saw that it came from a first-class dealer. Evidently M. Lelubert knew how to do things properly.

"Take these flowers to Alice's sitting-room," said Madame Le Martin to Madame Brevier, "she will appreciate them, and telephone Michel to go and see that poor fellow. I am afraid he has a very heavy cold."

Jeanne Brevier remained motionless and thoughtful. "I am afraid, auntie, that this marriage is impossible," she said at last.

"Impossible? Why? They can occupy separate rooms . . . of course one must be prudent. . . . How do wives manage whose husbands fall ill?"

"But, auntie, this unfortunate young man is

capable of falling deeply in love with Alice, and then . . ."

"Well?"

"But it's shocking to think of. . . . She will never consent to it, because she could not love him. . . ."

"And why should she love him? If she loved him she would be feeling pity for him, and would be wanting to give him a few years or months of happiness. • The more there would be to pity, the more would she attach herself to him to make him forget his condition."

"Oh, auntie! but it is stronger than one's self—invalidism." In this word pierced her sovereign dread of gradual decay and death. Surrounded by robust husband and children, she had always had an unconquerable aversion from disease and organic weaknesses of any kind.

"Aren't there people devoting themselves every day to cripples and unfortunates? What about sisters of charity and mothers who face all kinds of horrible things—and there are some who do?"

"But Alice cannot throw herself at the head of a gentleman whom she doesn't know. . . ."

"Really, you are astonishing, my dear niece. One would think that two people ought to know one another when they marry. If they did know each other—well, they would never marry! How many times had Edmond seen me? Ten minutes, and yet we were a very happy couple. And, after all, you must see things as they are! If Alice only wishes, she has but to stretch out her hand. Didn't you see the way he devoured her with his eyes?"

He would go down on his knees to receive her consent, and he has, all told, eighty thousand francs income." She added in a tone of easy cynicism, "Husbands pass, but money remains. Besides, why shouldn't this young fellow get stronger? Even when invalids are far gone, they often return to health. Let us admit that he's not quite cured—tuberculosis takes care of itself right along!"

"It's no use saying that," murmured Mme. Brevier. To buy the wealth of a dying man at such a cost was indeed to pay too high a price! Besides, they must always return to the fact of Alice's stubbornness, which could not be forced.

"Well, I shall go and find out how he's getting along," said Mme. Le Martin. But she did not go. Her niece's scruples, which she considered without any foundation for some one else, appeared very valuable for herself, and had made her think. These hotel rooms were full of microbes . . . she hoped M. Lelubert did not carry about contagion with him to any excess. . . . He had been to dine with her, shaken her by the hand, touched her furniture. She ordered M^{lle}. Duverset to see that there was a complete re-washing of the dishes and plates used, and Kiki was to be bathed from head to foot. She only received news of her protégé the next day, through Michel.

Mme. Le Martin was taking her walk in the Bois with Mme. Brevier when he called, and Alice received him. Michel looked at her with a singular expression, and said, in an embarrassed tone of voice—

"Your aunt asked me to call upon one of her friends, whom you know also, so he tells me. . . ."

"Yes, how is he?"

"Very ill, indeed. Even if he recovers from this inflammation of the lungs, he will never be any better."

He despised the expression of pity on Alice's face. There was no meaning in it! He couldn't believe that already she had any sympathy, or felt any stronger emotion, for this young man! And it was not jealousy, but a real pity he had experienced when, possessed by a desire to make a confidant of some one, M. Lelubert, glad to speak to a friend of these ladies, had, between two fits of coughing, let Michel naïvely see, by singing her praises, how much he admired Alice and found her beautiful. From certain incautious words of his, Michel had guessed the whole story of Mme. Le Martin's intriguing. Not for one moment would he do Alice the injustice to believe that she was lending herself to this; probably she was quite ignorant of the trap laid for her. But the idea that any one should dare to entangle her in this despicable way was odious to him. He couldn't forgive either her aunt or Mme. Brevier. With an aggressive smile, he said—

"M. Lelubert thinks of getting married. He hasn't concealed from me that your aunt encourages him in the idea. But she cannot be ignorant of his condition."

"What is the matter with him?"

"He is in the last stages of phthisis."

"Poor young man!"

"Yes!" said Michel in a bitter tone, scarcely

able to contain himself. "Yes! I am not betraying a professional secret to say what stares any one in the face. That's the kind of husband your aunt destined for you, and with what ultimate hope? . . . But perhaps you guess it. . . ."

Alice could not repress a movement of shame and horror. True, she had understood the plans built around M. Lelubert; but that her aunt knew the actual condition of this poor miserable creature, that she wished to throw her, young and healthy, into the arms of this dying young man, thirsting for love and desperately clutching at a phantom of life, and all the thirstier on that account, that was abominable! Completely upset, she asked—

"Then you think she knew it?"

"Not the slightest doubt."

Neither of them spoke, and the silence was painful. At last Michel continued—

"Similar acts are being committed every day; public opinion ignores them, and the law is powerless. We doctors are assisting daily at infamies that too often we cannot prevent; we scent them, we rub up against them, but they escape us. I have come across hideous passions, I have known atrocious actions caused by hatred, jealousy, love, but I have never seen any crimes comparable with those that are committed for the sake of money." He went on, "Yes, I have known men thieves, beg, lie, poison, commit any baseness, any horror, to procure money for themselves! And yet the men who do these things are looked upon as honourable. There is Mme. Le Martin, swollen to bursting with stolen wealth, surrounded by a cynically fraudulent luxury, whose husband ought to have

finished his life in prison, making shoes—there she is, with the world at her feet, because she is abjectly rich."

He finished abruptly, shrugging his shoulders. What was the good of saying these things? Was it delicate of him to hurt and wound Alice, an innocent hostage? He knew very well that she could not, in her inner conscience, think differently from him. All the more reason for his sufferings, because he knew she was not at home under this roof, and her mother ought not to have . . . Then, bitterly he evoked Pierre Brevier's memory. Why was he not there to protect those he loved? "And I," he thought, "I, almost his son, what can I do? But he did say to me, 'Try to make her love you if you can!' Make her love me, that's said easily enough, but . . ." The silence between them became embarrassing. At last Michel broke it by saying—

"Will you have the kindness to inform your aunt that I cannot do anything for her patient, and all that one will be able to advise him, in about three weeks' time, is to go into a sanatorium. In any case, I consider that my services are finished."

He felt angry with himself for uttering words which seemed wanting in humanity. But had he any time to lose? The fees which would have been handed to him for his visits would, frankly speaking, have burned his fingers. But all that did not prevent him from feeling a sort of sterile pity for this human being deprived of the normal conditions of life, and love, in spite of all his money, whose possession had made him, when he was too young a man, stumble into costly follies and commit absurd imprudences; money that would

be fought over rapaciously by distant unknown relatives when he was dead; infected money, that hereafter would become a source of fresh evils and fresh miseries!

Alice also made a vague ineffectual gesture. She wondered whether he was in a hurry.

"Won't you wait to see, mamma? They will soon be back."

"I must get to my work."

She smiled. "You are very fortunate to have work to go to. I seek without finding it."

He looked at her sadly. "Is your life hard here, then?"

"Very hard." But she smiled bravely, if a little wearily.

Once more his colour deepened. "You must have courage!" he said, and held out his hand.

It was an uncertain pressure which loosened when they felt the warm blood circulating between the two united palms, as if they were afraid of experiencing its full force.

"Oh, I have plenty of courage!" returned Alice. "And, then, again, this will not last for ever."

"No, certainly not," he answered quickly. With all his heart he wanted to withdraw her from that place, and assure her the independence she longed for. But what could he do? He glanced at her once more with a look of profound tenderness, seemed to wish to say something, but then turned away with a short, "Well, good-bye till I see you again."

"Soon?" asked Alice.

"Yes, soon."

She raised the window-blind to watch him cross

the boulevard. He disappeared round the street corner, but she remained standing there for a long time, motionless, as if she could still see him. She remembered with a feeling of gentle melancholy that they had parted without quarrelling.

Mme. Le Martin took the news quite lightly. "That poor M. Lelubert, really she would never have believed," etc. . . . And embarrassed by the uneasy expression she read on Jeanne Brevier's face, and by Alice's cold silence, she turned to Mdlle. Duverset, and said magnanimously, "This evening you must go and ask news of him."

She took care to warn Mdlle. Duverset to gargle with carbolic acid on her return, and throw away her gloves. As for herself, she would wait for M. Lelubert to be up and about again before seeing him. When alone with Mme. Brevier she cut short all unpleasant explanations by saying, in a joking way—

"Well, my dear, we must look out for another one! Now we will busy ourselves with M. de Souché." But seeing an incredulous smile pass over her niece's face, as if to say, "Supposing he resembles the last," . . . she very quickly added, "This is a country gentleman who has served in the army. He lives well, has splendid health, and a big fortune in landed property, is tired of living alone, and wants to get married. He's an old bachelor. When I say old . . . I don't mean that he looks his age."

"What age is he, then?"

"You would scarcely think he was forty-seven, he's only five years more than that." And Alice was only twenty-one.

"Besides, he is a baron," added the aunt; "and that sounds well."

Baron de Souché! Mme. Brevier wore a disabused expression on her face, which neither repulsed nor accepted the suggestion, but seemed to say, "We can but see him, and if it is necessary . . ."

CHAPTER VI

THE Gilles d'Arbelles' villa, at Pausilippo, almost descended into the sea. Finding their apartment in Naples too warm, they had left it, and installed themselves at the villa about the beginning of July. The rooms, lined and floored with porcelain mosaics, were delightfully cool. The garden also was cool with its exotic growths and enormous chestnut trees, its ramparts of cliffs, over which played a perpetual sea-breeze.

Every morning Gilles left for the Consulate in an English trap, which he drove himself. Raymonde then breathed freely, and immediately got up, and, scarcely clothed, with her hair raised to the top of her head, she strolled about in the great garden in a floating dressing-gown of white silk. She would go and sit in the belvedere, from which the sea spread before her its infinity of violet-blue waters. About ten o'clock she descended the little winding path to the miniature beach, where, sheltered from idle gazers, she bathed in a big hollow formed by the sea in the rocks. It was so gilded by the sun that the water in it had a transparent appearance, and the rocks were the colour of tortoise-shell.

That morning she breathed in with full lungs the intoxication of being alive, and the satisfaction of being beautiful. She had helped Gilles to get

off, and given a piece of sugar to Bob, the pony, who had crunched it between his teeth with a contented motion of his head. She had even held the pony's impatient head by the bit, whilst Gilles mounted into the trap and took hold of the reins and whip.

• "Au revoir," she said amiably; "don't return too late. There will be specially prepared rizotto for you."

Gilles had smiled. Rizotto agreed with him, especially when cooked with chicken's liver, which reduced its somewhat saffronous flavour. Beppo, the old lame gardener, opened the gate for His Excellence, and M. d'Arbelles, letting Bob prance a bit and paw the ground, made a dashing exit while lifting his hat politely to his wife.

Raymonde watched Beppo re-close the gate, and her infantine expression of pleasure did not leave her face. It was not that she cared in the slightest to know whether Gilles would arrive without a hitch at his destination, or would return in time for lunch; she had only shown him this amiability from a feeling of peaceable indifference, and because she was in harmony with herself and her agreeable surroundings—the fragrant garden and the light warm atmosphere. Besides, she remembered it was Thursday, and that she would be having a letter from Mark that morning. These letters, so full of confidences, ardour, and passion, now filled her life.

Not that Raymonde was a particularly sentimental being, but there was to be found in her character very definite tastes for romantic situations, and she enjoyed, with an excessive and

voluptuous intensity, having such a mystery in her life. She knew it was too good to last; out of it must come proceedings full of the unknown—perhaps annoyances of all kinds, if not actual danger. In the mean while, to cradle one's self in one's sin was so sweet. Raymonde enjoyed this sin with true delight. Ten times a day she repeated, "I have a lover, I have a lover," and said it with a sort of pride, because few women could flatter themselves to have such a hold over a man of his particular quality; there weren't two Marks in the world! . . . When she had fallen at first, a feeling akin to stupor had possessed her; the irreparable was accomplished then! Whether she wished to or not, she could never again become the Raymonde that she had been the day before; from henceforth she carried about with her a secret stain of which she ought to feel ashamed . . . and she had been surprised to feel so little perturbation. She belonged to Mark, that was all. What was there so very extraordinary about that? The world in which she lived cloaked such weaknesses indulgently with a thin veil of deceitful conventionality. Was she not accustomed to hear it said that nearly all wives were light in their conduct, and that their husbands were no better? Why should she bestow on that dreadful word, "adultery," a more serious meaning than the worthiest of people do to old bogey stories?

It was not yesterday that she had remarked the world attaching more importance to words than to things; for instance, "Do as you like, but don't make a boast of it—dissimulate." She had believed, on the faith of the novelist, that her soul would

become transfigured, that she would be moved by remorse and fear. How was it, then, that she felt so joyous? Did she not feel any shame, any embarrassment, when she said to herself, "I am deceiving my husband, yet living under the same roof, eating at the same table with him?" Was she, then, really deprived of moral responsibility, as he had once reproached her? Doubtless it would have been much better if she had not been obliged to tell lies and deceive, as if she were committing a bad action. But who, then, had driven her to this necessity, if not Gilles himself? Why had he not been willing to give her back her liberty when she had proposed it to him soon after her father's death? Let him be angry with himself if she was acting badly. Her disloyalty was only the cunning of the weaker creature, which temporizes until the day comes that it can escape through the widely opened door.

But she confessed to herself that a particularly feminine pleasure was mingled with this risky game, and that to lull Gilles's suspicions amused the eternal Delilah in her composition. As a matter of fact, she had less detestation for her husband since she had given him a real grievance; in their improved relations with one another, the surface amiability she showed him was due as much to a feeling of caution and perfidy as to any spontaneous idea of compensation on her part.

Why was she no longer as angry with him as hitherto? He had neither prevented, nor seen, nor guessed that anything was taking place. A simple instinct of perversity gave her a sort of feeling of joy in making him a laughing-stock in her thoughts,

at the same time that she kept a little hatred towards her suspicious tormentor, who, as she knew now, had had her followed and spied upon in Paris.

She plucked a big piece of purple Spanish jessamine, pinned it in her hair, opened her parasol, and walked through the gently sloping alleys down to the sea. Poor Gilles! She was now feeling so kindly disposed towards him that, concerting with Mark, she had decided he should receive his decoration on the Fourteenth of July. 'He had concealed his desire for it so badly, and was so satisfied with it. Mark had promised to obtain this cross, and it never struck her that this secret agreement between them constituted an outrageous, immoral, and flip-pant act towards her husband. She looked upon it as a sort of compensation which, after all, she owed him. . . . And she was sure, moreover, that he would not deny himself the pleasure of accepting it.

She had to acknowledge, besides, that he was less disagreeable than formerly. The continued persistence, flattering, but superfluous of his lover-like fidelity, although she managed to elude his attentions, proved to her how very desirable she was, and strengthened the intoxication she felt at having given herself to one who knew how to arouse in her the most ardent joys of her heart and senses. More and more did she feel that she belonged to Mark, thought only of him, was moved by regrets and hopes, and waited with passionate desire for the meetings which took place from time to time in a mysterious and silent-looking house in the *via San Severo*, when Mark could get away from Paris for a couple of days. He brought with him the fever, the perfume, the intoxication of that city;

there were inexhaustible talks, intimate confidences, interspersed with fiery kisses and caresses. Even the brevity of these all too short moments kept alive and at fever heat the unappeased ardour of their love.

To-day was Thursday, and there would be a letter from Mark.

Latterly, before leaving Naples, she would enter furtively, and as if in search of ornaments, a fancy dealer's shop, hidden away at the end of the Strada di Constanopoli. An old woman, Maria Guistignani, bought over by Mark—a receiver of stolen goods, whom one of his friends, a lawyer, had rescued from an affair in which she had been threatened with a trial and prison, but had given him sufficient to bribe the plaintiffs—would slip into Raymonde's hands, at the back of the dusty old shop, Mark's letters. With what nervous impatience she thrust them into her bodice! and with what bravado she carried about with her these sheets that Gilles was so far from suspecting, and that he would have been so delighted to intercept, as he often did her correspondence coming through the post! . . . One or two badly gummed envelopes which he had interfered with. It was a double pleasure for her to deceive a deceiver. To have had them sent to the *poste restante*, where she would have been too easily recognized under the glass vault of the Umberto Gallery, would never have procured her this delicious sensation of stolen happiness.

Stretched on a rocking-chair in the belvedere, she looked with interest at the pink sails of the fishing-boats, which glided over the glittering sea that resembled a mirror broken into millions of

shining particles. What a radiant morning! The heat of this volcanic soil, the feverish languor of Italy, the land of love and blood, whose very dust seems the ashes of badly burnt-out passions, all enveloped her with a magnetic effluvium. She recalled all the spots where, for four months, she had driven in her indolence and beauty—beauty which made the passers-by turn round and stare at her, and the men of the lower classes smile at her with their brilliant eyes and strong-looking jaws. There was no landscape with which the thought of Mark was not associated. Pompeii, with its little museum, where the plaster has moulded the impress of the dead bodies surprised by the earthquake and the ever-rumbling Vesuvius, whose canopy of white smoke she perceived on the horizon! Pompeii, with its streets where the cart ruts still remain, and where the fountains show their well-used brink, that supported the hands of those who came to take a drink; the little houses, with their frescoes, still wonderfully clear, and the interior courts, which speak to one, with their tiny dwarf gardens and their dried-up water-springs, the stones splashed with sunlight, and the silence of this town resuscitated from death to life! The bays and the Cape of Messina, the towns of scents and harmony, such as Sorrento and Amalfi, and the adorable island of Capri!

All this, the charm of which had not yet wearied her, awoke in her a thousand prolonged sensations which mingled one with another—thoughts of love and passion with a vague feminine nostalgia. She did not want Paris particularly just then. The divine charm and fascination of

sky, sea, and land pricked her heart and bewitched her flesh. What country was comparable with this for love?

With what a feeling of intoxication she wanted to enjoy with Mark, freely and with all her heart, these glorious mornings, these fiery afternoons, these unsurpassed twilights when the sea assumes the appearance of a dark wine, and Naples, like a precious piece of chiselled ivory, is reflected in the mirror of the waters! The purple and orange sky slowly tones down its fairy-like tints, and the breath which is wafted from the bosom of the sea seizes your heart! . . .

And even Naples itself was not displeasing to her, with its human crowds, its alleys like staircases, its muddy streets that the rain converts into gutters, its splendid equipages all intermingled in the most familiar way with the lower classes, its beggars, its shrill-voiced women, its swarming brats, its street-angles ornamented with shrines and lighted wax candles, its pompous funerals where the coffin, under the pall which covers the bearers, seems like death itself walking along. Yes, Naples, with its pauper suburbs, its hurdles upon which the long skeins of macaroni are hung to dry in the wind, its houses where the motley rags hang drying from the windows, its little cabs drawn by the weirdest-looking horses! What horror she would have had for all this, however, and what weariness would have submerged her, if she had not had her love to colour all she saw with the splendour of its joy!

Owing to her mourning, she could dispense with visiting, and it permitted her to receive only

in a half intimacy, thus limiting the society bores, and leaving her the choice of pleasanter acquaintanceships. With true Italian courtesy, prompt with the smile and the open hand, she had been warmly received. But what did it matter to her? She was only there as a bird of passage. It was only a temporary stopping-place after the troubles which had upset her life—an oasis of light and enchantment!

She thought, with the fulness of pride, of the sensation she had felt that morning when she gazed at her reflection in the large flower-painted looking-glass, and saw herself triumphant in the freshness of her beauty. It seemed to her as if unknown forces were pouring through her being, and as if they came from everywhere—from the calcined soil, from the hardy trees, from the dazzling sea. She abandoned herself to the fresh odorous warmth which caressed her whole body, and penetrated her with a delicious languor; she closed her eyes, voluptuously. When she re-opened them, Maria Gustiagnini was standing in front of her. The old woman, with her Judy-like nose, her wrinkles and her goitre, had the appearance of a character out of a goblin fairy-tale, genial and crafty. With many curtseys and grimaces she drew from her basket—filled with old lace, engraved ivory boxes, and miniatures—a sealed envelope, which suddenly and imperceptibly she slid from her horny, crooked fingers into the signora's white ones. Rapidly, after a purchase and a piece of gold, Raymonde dismissed the old woman, and running to the bottom of the garden, in a niche joined by some overhanging rocks, she read Mark's letter.

Her features lighted up, for she read that he would be with her on the morrow, and would await her at their rendezvous in the little house of the via San Severo. She began to laugh, clicking her fingers like a schoolgirl and singing that haunting Neapolitan air—

• “Aissera, Naninè, mene sagliete
 Tu saie, addo? •
 Addo . . .”

She knew well that the beauty of the morning had been too great not to bring her some happiness, and she pirouetted along the avenue like a white shadow, her light form and airy grace, seen from afar by Beppo, bringing a smile to his old face. He watched her indulgently, leaning on the handle of his spade.

Mark would be there, all hers, and she all his!

CHAPTER VII

At the luncheon-hour Gilles entered with a radiant face, bearing a confidential letter from his chief which he showed to Raymonde. The thing was accomplished and he had the cross! The decree returned from the Chancellor's had only to be signed by the President. The Paris papers would have published the promotion by now. He received Raymonde's congratulations with the modesty of a man who knows what he is worth, and attributes success to his personal merit alone. Seen through the prism of his wine-glass, from which he was drinking the excellent wine of Capri, life appeared rose-coloured to him. He consumed with good appetite the rizotto, prepared by their cook, Annunziata, who excelled in dainty dishes; also the hare with chocolate, Jerusalem artichokes, and any number of different kinds of pastries and fritters. This enviable and much-envied position, this ribbon which would decorate his button-hole in the spring-time of his precocious career, compensated him somewhat for his latter-day tribulations, namely, the loss of a double fortune and the relative loss of his wife. If but the conjugal storm were really and definitely to sober down, if he could, once and for all, banish suspicion and again press between his arms a Raymonde who had grown

wiser, he would still find pleasure in being reconciled to life. He was in the best disposed mood to listen, without too much distrust, to Raymonde, saying to him in a perfectly natural tone of voice—

“The Princess Scorsini has written to invite me to go and spend a day or two with her at Monte Falcone before her departure. She says very kindly that she wants to take any messages or communications from me for mamma and Alice. I would like to send each of them a box of those liqueur chocolates and a bottle of scent which they sell at Buonto’s, rue de Tolède; mamma dotes on them.”

She was no longer surprised at herself for lying so readily; the lie which facilitates everything, which oils the hinges, and makes the bolts pliant, puts a felt carpet under your feet, and softens shocks and sudden blows, had become so familiar to her lips that she employed it for everything, for a mere nothing, for pleasure, with a perversity that was amused at seeing Gilles so easily taken in, he who ordinarily was so suspicious. She remembered their constant quarrels, their mutual bitterness; by means of dissembling and a little flattery she had managed to bring about a sufficiently good understanding between them on the surface.

At dessert she drew from a little box the surprise that she had carefully prepared for some days past—a red ribbon which she fastened in his button-hole. Then she took a few steps backward to judge the effect of it, satisfied at the bottom with a woman’s imperishable vanity. Gilles being raised higher also raised her higher, and although she

had her own opinions as to him and to herself, he certainly, she thought, cut a better figure thus.

"But how will you go to Mont-Falcone?" he inquired.

"The Princess's landau will be waiting for me at the Castellamare station."

"What an insupportable chatter-box she is!" he murmured, "with that Neapolitan exuberance! She has a voice like a captain of the horse police. Well, she seems to have taken a liking for you, and I haven't any wish to speak ill of her."

Gilles could not tolerate her, and it was designedly that Raymonde, in thus leading up to her act of folly, had taken away from him every pretext he might offer to accompany her to the residence of the Princess, whose departure for France she knew had been fixed for the day after to-morrow, but was put forward a day, this being sufficient to furnish her with an *alibi*; a fragile *alibi*, true enough, and at the mercy of any passing chance; but since she had submitted herself to Le Vigreux's influence, she rushed into the unknown with the fine recklessness of a professed gambler. Whatever was to happen, let it come!

With the utmost tranquillity, and seated at Gilles' side behind the frisky Bob, she allowed her husband, who was feeling very amiably disposed, but also rather wary, to drive her to the station, and take her ticket for Castellamare. He put her portmanteau up in the net and provided her with illustrated papers and caramels for the journey, and asked her whether she was all right. He spoke of the beautiful weather, shook hands with her, and said, "Good-bye, until we meet again." At the first

station she left the train, and, with a small veil over her face (after having changed her cloak and hat *en route*) she returned to Naples, *incognito*. So much the worse, if any one should meet her! But she succeeded in reaching safely the discreetly situated apartments where Donna Rosa del Mele—a respectable-looking old lady, wearing a mantilla over her white hair and well-worn black silk dress—the *contessa*, who has seen better days—received her with a smile in her faded eyes, which bore the reflection of a vanished beauty and charm. There were flowers in the sitting-room, furnished with mahogany in the style of the empire, with its old-time artificial palms and wreaths; there were flowers in the bedroom, with its great, low bed decorated with the Neapolitan eagle—a relic of the furniture scattered from one of Murat's palaces, and in the dining-room a slight reflection had been prepared, consisting of cold fish, tiny game patties, preserved fruits dipped in maraschino, wicker-basket flasks and champagne standing in the ice-pail!

Mark would arrive, and when he did so—introduced into the room noiselessly by the *contessa*, who immediately withdrew, and was thenceforth invisible—when she had seen him hold open his arms, and smile at her with the mad light of happiness in his eyes, with what joy she would throw herself into them . . . and then what an embrace!

Le Vigreux's first words, after he had seated Raymonde in a long chair with a high back, and he was on a big stool at her feet, were—

“My darling, I am a free man! The difficulties which you seemed to feel from my letters are

conquered, and my divorce was pronounced yesterday!"

These words dazzled her. In her feeling of vehement gratitude, her ardent passion, she asked herself whether she could not offer him her own liberty in exchange? Mark, free! Before the loyalty of this man whose promised word held good, and who—and he said it of himself—trod down everything in his path which interfered with his projects; before this proof of love given by a character which had never shown any weakness in his love affairs, she felt moved by an intoxication of pride—the pride of the triumphant slave who conquers by her superiority, as an object of worship, the master whom she obeys.

She knew that this divorce, due to the noble, sorrowing, and tender sacrifice of Thérèse Le Vigreux, had been obtained at the cost of that poor woman's hidden tears; she knew that Mark, however rough he was, had felt pity for his wife; but still she thought the more highly of him for being so strong. He appeared to her in the light of an invincible support, the magical guarantee of her future; he, her lover, the husband of her choice to whom she could well entrust her woman's weakness—for *she* did not fear to be betrayed and thrown aside some day, like poor Thérèse.

She had not deceived herself as to the romantic passion which this positive and ambitious man—who could quite logically have contented himself with passing caprices—felt for her. It was a complete and intense love, satisfying his desire of an ideal in life, and for which he had been seeking amidst his many adventures of pleasure, and

realized at last at the side of a woman whom he loved for that mysterious and perfect correspondence of body, soul, and spirit which can occasionally unite two beings of the opposite sexes.

Hand-in-hand, eyes fixed on each other's faces, interrupting their never-ending conversations every now and then by a kiss which sent a thrill to the uttermost fibre of their beings, they had no thought for meals or time. Mark explained that, owing to the serious illness of his wife, which had lasted a couple of months, the suit had been postponed; he had not wished to gain it without the consent of her free will. In simple words he told her how much the poor woman had suffered, with what disinterestedness she had given up the right to his name without wishing to accept any pecuniary compensation. She had not possessed much money when she married him; but she would remain where she was at that time, faithful to his memory, and praying for his happiness. She had spoken of Raymonde, for whom she was being sacrificed, with sadness, but without bitterness; and Raymonde could fancy that she heard the counsels that Thérèse Le Vigreux would have given her with a kindly frankness, namely, to make Mark happy.

In spite of the selfishness of her victory, Raymonde was touched by the beauty of this lofty soul, and felt that, in her place, she certainly could not have shown such dignity and courage.

"And now," said Le Vigreux, "it is your turn to become free, for I want you to be my darling wife, and one of the queens of Paris, the most beautiful, the most courted, the most powerful.

You can get divorced, you know, without any public to-do, if you wish it."

Wish it? Certainly, Raymonde wished it. The moment was come for her to act, she had her debt to pay! And Mark, eagerly raised her in his arms and carried her, laughing, into the dining-room; thus clasped in each other's arms, a fever ran through their veins, and to the very marrow of their bones they felt the exquisite sensation of each other's nearness.

The following day, after their long, but all too short meeting, the most enjoyable one they had yet had together, Gilles, before entering the offices of the consulate, by chance knocked up against one Guiseppe Banfi, an importunate little, dark, hairy creature, who organized all kinds of sporting matches, and was, at the same time, one of the most worldly minded and most gossipy of Neapolitan idlers. He called out—

"And how is your charming Viscountess? And you, too, my dear Viscount?"

It was not without pleasure that Gilles heard these titles, unused in France, and which added still more to Italian graciousness, which was always ready to bestow the rank and title of his Excellence, etc.

"Did you know that Dusè was coming to Naples? Our very dear Della Lucca broke her leg yesterday in a motor accident. That's going to grieve our charming Princess Scorsini, who left yesterday for Scotland. . . ."

"I thought," said Gilles, much surprised, "that she was only leaving to-morrow or the day after." He was just about to add, "And my wife is staying

with her," but, like a far-seeing diplomatist, he refrained.

"No, no, no . . . she left the day before yesterday morning! *Per Dio!* I was there with la Palensi, the Big Cusmano, and Lord and Lady Gauntlet; we saw her into the train with her eldest daughter, who was in a very bad temper, because certain dresses she was expecting . . . well, you can imagine!"

But Gilles heard no more, he hastily slipped off, with his temples bathed in perspiration. Arrived at his office, he fell down overwhelmed into an arm-chair. Where was Raymonde? When would she be home? Had she lied to him, then? All his suspicions returned upon him, and also some fears. . . . She certainly had gone to Monte-Falcone, and probably had become ill there! But she would have telegraphed him in that case. . . . No, she knew of the princess's departure, and had turned it to her account.

What duplicity, what perfidious plotting! Why had she told lies, if not to deceive him? With whom had she been? With him, whose name returned to his lips with the bitterness of hatred? But she no longer spoke of him, and he had been flattering himself that separation, time . . . Oh, madman and fool that he was! And other injuries of a more or less precise nature ran through his thoughts. Where should he look for her now? Naples was big. . . . Was she really in Naples? Supposing she had gone off, never to return? From pale he became red, and unfastened his false collar, for he felt suffocated. To make him, a d'Arbelles, ridiculous, just on the day following

his being decorated! Ah! What a wicked woman she was! This idea of her seemed to comfort him. Ah! had she now made him enough of a laughing-stock?

He passed an abominable day and night. A Paris newspaper that he happened to open made him acquainted with Le Vigreux's divorce. This threw a flood of light upon everything, and he had no more doubts. If Trochard were still there, he might, without compromising his, d'Arbelles', dignity too much, open up his investigations once more. . . . But to whom could he apply here, in Naples, without risking his misfortunes being misused abroad everywhere?

And the less he doubted the real truth, the more he clung to an absurd hope which only partly consoled him, to the effect that Raymonde had been taken ill, or was the victim of a bad accident, had lost consciousness, and was being cared for by strangers. Perhaps even brigands had carried her off, and he would be receiving a summons to secure her freedom by the payment of a big ransom. No! His instinctive jealousy was once more aroused; also, he recalled vague, imperceptible signs in Raymonde's general attitude and manners which made him feel very sure there was something seriously wrong. Here was indeed the irremediable, making a mess of their lives!

He was feeling the keenest and most mortifying humiliation. Was it possible that he was being deceived? It would, indeed, be too horrible, and he refused to admit its possibility. That others should be—and he had often smiled about this kind of thing during conversations in the smoking-room—

but not he! His conventionality, his self-esteem, and that fastidious something about him which it seemed to him incredible that a wife should not more than appreciate, surely should preserve him from such an occurrence, very common, he admitted, but for him so exceptional that he would infinitely have preferred to lose an arm, or suffer the ultimate abandonment of Raymonde's inheritance, or even mourn her death.

Of all calamities that hang above a human head, this one seemed to him the most dreadful. Already he perceived the smiles, the blinking eyes, and heard the muttered . . . "Ah! you know about those d'Arbelles . . . ?" That terrible chatter-box of a Banfi would hawk the news everywhere. Naples, so indulgent for love-affairs, would distend its cheeks with a grin, and Paris! . . . What an unpleasant effect it would have at the ministry; he would, of course, be obliged to resign, and the future altogether appeared very black to him.

And how should he behave under such circumstances to such an unworthy woman? Should he kill her? Evidently, if he discovered her in her sin the law gave him that right, or, at least, the justification. Certainly, he would have great pleasure in discharging the contents of his revolver at her and her lover. Take that!—pan! pan! take that! And he could picture himself throwing the smoking firearms at her feet, and crossing his arms in front of the two dying victims—justice satisfied!

But the scandal, the trial! Oh no! Of course he could escape from that by killing himself after; but why should he be such a fool? Because his wife deceived him—however frightful the idea—

why should he sacrifice his life and disappear also? No, thank you! And then again he could not, like a bricklayer or a drunken porter, punish her in such a way with a knotted horse-whip, that she would be obliged to keep her bed several months, suffering from the smarting memory of it . . . he, a gentleman! . . . It wasn't the desire to do it which was wanting. It would do him good to lash her, howling, with a hunting-crop, as he would a rebellious and disreputable cur . . . but at this game Le Vigreux would be stronger than he, and Gilles could not see himself striped all over in his turn with the strokes of a cane and with a black eye. These were the manners of brawlers, the pugilism of savages; he wouldn't lower himself to it!

Why did his hatred, then, go straight to that man? Naples wasn't lacking in handsome young officers, in their sky-blue shoulder-capes, who were depraved enough . . . for a very great deal he would have preferred it not to have been the one his clairvoyance foresaw. He had always felt for Le Vigreux a physical repulsion, a sort of instinctive warning against him. When he was near him he experienced a sensation of sickness, a sort of fear, feeling that he was a man capable of anything and everything, and knowing him to be invulnerable up to the present, in the immense power that his newspaper gave him, and the credit he enjoyed from the possession of his enormous rolls of money. His pride would have suffered less if it had been any other, even some one totally unknown to him.

During that day Gilles did not dare stir from his villa. Supposing he were met and interrogated? He had forbidden his door to all visitors, and he

wandered in a lamentable fashion through the empty rooms, from Raymonde's bed and dressing-rooms, through which floated the perfume of her clothes, to the dining-room, where he had not been able to touch the cold red mullets, served with tomato sauce, which Annunziata had prepared for him.

He kept on asking himself what kind of a countenance the unfortunate husbands of the educated and upper classes exhibited in the face of such a discovery. He would like to have known the forms of the protocol which would combine dignity and reproaches, grief and contempt. Carried away as by the constantly revolving wheels of an express train, overcome by this clamorous obsession, there obstinately returned to his ears the refrain: "But what am I to do? What is to be done?"

In his distress, alternating with fits of rage, it was an indescribable relief when, towards evening, he heard a carriage slow down before the iron gates. Beppo took her valise, and a woman, whose outline was well known to him, paid the driver.

A light footstep ran up the gravel path and came to the door. He rushed forward to open it, and Raymonde entered.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE returned, almost dizzy with her happiness and sensations of pleasure, grave with the resolution which was placed upon her. In order that her beautiful dream should be continued and be converted into reality, she would be obliged the coming days to go through some fearful scenes. Up to the present, Gilles had seemed to her a sort of scarecrow, a person of no importance, less than a man. But, all the same, she dreaded facing a decisive conversation with him, and would willingly have adjourned the same until the next day—or the day following that—for when this husband should be made acquainted with the mortal injury she had inflicted upon him, would not the original beast in him surge uppermost? She had too much of the feminine in her composition not to fear brutality, threats, blows even. Supposing he disfigured her . . . injured her beauty, which was so dear to her? In spite of these fears, her delicate, tender, soft skin shivered with a sensation akin to pleasure at the thought of possible peril. But, never mind, she preferred to have done with it and know the worst, hoping that everything would turn out better than she expected. What was the use of melodrama? When a man's fury is not odious, it is ridiculous;

there was no medium. Why couldn't they separate from one another without violence?

"You spent a pleasant time at the princess's?" asked Gilles.

Fortunately the shades of evening sufficiently darkened the room to conceal his face.

"Oh yes, very pleasant," answered Raymonde, in an assured tone, throwing her cloak upon a chair and removing the pins from her hat. "She is really quite an excellent creature at bottom, you know . . . but I have returned with a headache, and will tell you all about it later!"

"What a nuisance, because I wanted to ask you a lot of things! . . . Are you quite sure you saw the princess?" And Gilles, suddenly pressing the electric button, flooded the room with light, and looked at Raymonde, who was dumfounded.

"Certainly. Why?"

"Because she had already left Naples . . . don't invent anything, there's no way of escape, I know everything! You did not go to Monte-Falcone; you were with . . . shall I name him?"

Gilles had intended to advance step by step, to sift to the bottom of things, with the self-control of a lover of justice, but a cold frenzy had suddenly taken possession of him, and he stopped at no halting-places on the way. His eyes were bloodshot, his face sharpened and ravaged, as he asked: "Why do you tell lies?"

With an indefinable accent she replied in a very low voice, "Out of pity."

"Thank you for your intention. Is it also from generosity that you have taken a lover?"

She passed her hand over her fluffy, wavy hair,

made sure it was all right, and then sat down with a forced calmness. But she was very pale, and her heart had experienced a shock.

"I lied to you because you would have received my frankness very badly."

"Could you imagine that it would be pleasant for me to hear?" His face was contorted, but such was his regard for appearances, that he assumed an easy, gentlemanly attitude, leaning against a piece of furniture with his arms crossed. But he felt the wish to hurl himself upon her and beat her until she cried aloud for pardon and begged for mercy. However, she raised her head with a little movement of decision, and answered—

"Let us have an explanation, since it is necessary. Yes, I have lied to you in order to secure peace and gain a few months of tranquillity; and whether you wish to hear it or not, out of pity for you . . . yes, out of pity. You say that I have a lover, and that you can name him. It would not be a very difficult matter to do so. I love Mark with my whole heart, and I belong to him."

"And you have the audacity to tell it me to my face, like that?"

"But, my dear friend, you first of all reproach me for holding my tongue, and now you reproach me for telling the truth; if you prefer, let us stop at this point. I can only speak the truth now, and I am sorry it is so painful for you to hear. In Paris I summed up the reasons why we should separate, and you wouldn't understand them. What has resulted from it was bound to happen; it was fate."

"How much I admire you!" said Gilles, with a gesture of great irony.

"You have no reason to do so; why be melodramatic?" asked Raymonde. "We shan't be the first ones to separate. We no longer care for one another, and we leave each other."

"Then marriage, the vow of fidelity, no longer exists for you? At any rate, I—I have been faithful to you, and a scrupulous, attentive husband. . . ."

"What do you want? I no longer care for you, and I love some one else . . ."

Raymonde said this slowly, somewhat sadly, but with serenity. She was regaining her presence of mind, and her husband was not behaving brutally to her. A sense of shame was mingled with this feeling of reassurance. Why should she depend any longer upon a man whom she was treating so badly? Very sincerely she wished it had not been possible to make him feel humiliated; but so it was, unfortunately. She felt guilty of false conduct towards him, but did not accuse herself of anything worse—in the strength of her exultant pride. She loved Mark, and now dared to utter it aloud.

Gilles looked at her with a mingled expression of disgust, irritability, sorrow and desire, and with the force of regret, for it had all come too suddenly upon him. She had not ceased to be the same Raymonde that only yesterday he longed for, and now she had returned to him a different creature, soiled by the hideous thoughts which his festering jealousy created, which imagined her pressed with passion in the arms of another. He exclaimed—

"And whilst I was thinking of you with the princess . . . Oh, don't smile, it isn't so long since I have known it."

"I have no wish to smile."

"You were amusing yourself at the thought of making me a laughing-stock. Oh, it's so amusing, the poor credulous husband!"

"We needn't speak of mutual confidences, my friend, when you were having your wife tracked by an infamous detective agency!"

"And was I wrong? Oh, why did I ever come across you? You have brought me only suffering, ruin, and dishonour . . ."

— "Then why do you want to keep me in spite of myself?"

"I know what I ought to do, to insult your lover and force him to fight."

This solution suddenly appeared to him as the only one conformable with a point of honour, and worthy of well-brought-up men; but scarcely had he pronounced the words than he recognized the vanity of them. 'What would happen afterwards? One of them would be wounded. If it were Le Vigreux that would not set it right with Raymonde—quite apart from the fact that he might not kill him. And if Le Vigreux wounded him, he would be rendered grotesque, even though an object of sympathy. And what would that prove?

"You can do whatever you think right," she made answer. "But, if I might offer you a piece of advice, and if you had sufficient reason to listen to me . . ."

"What, then?" he sneered.

"What has happened is very unpleasant for us

both. You are suffering from it, and I am very sorry. But what is the use of aggravating the painful situation? What is the use of raising the scandal of a duel? Besides, every one knows that Mark is unrivalled with the sword and the revolver."

That was true, and he had not remembered it. It was quite evident that such a *bombastes furioso* of a man would never give himself the chivalrous pleasure of shooting in the air or running himself through the body.

"Let us separate; let us divorce each other," suggested Raymonde. "If you have quite determined to create a scandal, you will get plenty of chance in that way to satisfy your revenge."

"I suppose you know," said Gilles, in a tone of hatred, "that I can drag both of you to justice, you and your accomplice, and have you put into prison."

"Or at least have us fined," conceded Raymonde. "The sum would scarcely be high enough, though, to give you back public esteem!"

He was silent, and gazed at his shoes. She confounded him. Was it really he, the outraged husband, strong in the majesty of his revenge, who felt himself so disarmed, so utterly powerless? He had the consciousness of presenting a pitiful sort of figure, and his despair was increased by it.

"The scandal! That's good!" he replied bitterly. "Did I ever seek it? Don't you believe that I have some little consideration for my name and that of others, and for your father's memory?"

"Well, then, why don't you resign yourself to

the necessity of our separating? Take back your liberty and give me mine."

"And what would you do with it? You would marry that man who has just secured his freedom, and secured it with the express intention of getting married to you. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," answered Raymonde.

"And I say no, no!" and Gilles began to stamp his feet with rage. "Don't you count upon any such thing, for you haven't considered me! What kind of an imbecile do you take me for? You ride rough-shod over my heart, you trample upon me, and then you imagine that I am merely going to say, 'Certainly, my beautiful wife, by all means, I am only too honoured to give you up to M. Le Vigreux. Deuce take it all, what a successor! It's a great honour for me!' Never; do you understand?—never! You cannot get a divorce against me without a cause, without proofs, without any fault on my side, and I intend to keep you; you will remain my wife, and that will be your punishment!"

"Have you thought about this?" said Raymonde. "Anger is a bad counsellor, and if you will not renounce me . . ."

"Well, finish!"

"I warn you I shall never give up Mark. If you force me to do so, I shall go away and shall follow him to the ends of the earth. So much the worse for you. You will have brought it on yourself."

Gilles, like a madman, held his head between his two hands. Yes, he saw now that he would never conquer her, never persuade her. He had thrown himself blindly into this net, but rather

than extricate himself or set Raymonde free from the conjugal yoke he would prefer to die of rage there right way. Never had he clung to her so much as since she had confessed to him so distinctly that she no longer cared for him and preferred some one else. He stammered, in the lowered and ashamed voice of a very unhappy man.

"If I were to forgive you, Raymonde, if I were to propose that we should forget this frightful moment? I am suffering far more than you! If I offered you complete forgiveness? In exchange you would give up that man, you would swear to me never to see him again or speak to him?"

She gazed at him with a feeling of stupor. "But, my dear friend, I am not asking you to forgive me . . . your forgiveness can touch me because I pity you, but what can I do with it? My life is no longer here. . . ."

"Yes," he replied in a dolorous tone of voice, "I am only a poor devil, that's all. Doubtless you loaded me with favours when you married me, and now again when you deceive me. What you want is a nabob who will cover you with gold, even if he were a robber—yes, a robber! Is your Le Vigreux anything else than one, and I would repeat it to his face. Gold, gold! . . . Do you know what you are? You are a woman of the town and nothing more. . . ."

She sprang to her feet under the sting of the insulting words, "And what are you? You were keeping me as a kind of ransom for the money I still represent . . . in expectations; isn't that true?"

"No, Raymonde, no," he protested, in admitting to himself that it was true, however; but the fear of losing the slightest opportunity of re-entering into his legitimate position added force to his denial.

Half sincere, but at any rate believing herself to be so at the moment, she replied, "I am not the kind of woman you call me. It is true that I have a horror of moderate means, and that I cannot conceive a life without wealth; but neither can I go on living without love, and if I were obliged to decide between you two, it would still be love with Mark that I should choose, even were he ruined and without resources. Don't let us lower ourselves with these recriminations. Is it absolutely necessary to hate one another, and tear each other to pieces still more?"

As the darkness deepened, the cool breath of the night subtly penetrated throughout the room and chilled their souls. A big moth fluttered round the electric bulbs. Gilles had lowered his head, the tears started to his eyes, and he bit his lips until the blood came. Raymonde breathed with difficulty, her eyes troubled.

Both of them were feeling the effects of an exhausting struggle which was devoid of beauty or triumph, and a great silence weighed upon them, the silence of a tragical crisis when something has been broken for ever.

FOURTH PART

"VICTORY remained to the love which had not weakened, which had not despaired, to the love as strong as life itself."

MARCELLE TINAGRE.

CHAPTER I

DAY by day and week by week time had gradually glided past. Mme. Le Martin, who closed her Paris house during the summer months, and went either to the seaside or to one of the watering-places, had cleverly decided this year to make a sojourn in the province of Touraine, where beautiful scenery and a temperate climate were to be found. She had rented for the autumn months the manor of La Guette, situated on the Loire, quite close to the estate of M. de Souché who would make them an excellent neighbour.

Sometimes the baron's four-in-hand, which announced its arrival by a solemn and prolonged blowing of the horn, would come and convey the ladies to the Bécassière, his magnificent domain, half farm and half castle, where they were received to luncheon in a dining-room, ornamented with the heads of antlers and horns of stags, and warmed by trunks of trees burning in a gigantic fireplace. Sometimes, mounted on his old chestnut bay mare, Olympia, a creature still full of fire and exploits of all kinds, M. de Souché would make his appearance at the park gates of La Guette, and ride her, prancing and curvetting like a Spanish dancer, as far as the big lawn. In his grey velvet breeches, varnished top-boots and

dark coloured riding-coat, he looked like a well-to-do gentleman farmer, and only appeared too thick-set and countrified, broad-chested, and of heavy carriage when on foot. Simplicity and good nature were to be read on his features, which were marked all over with a tiny network of veins. The slightly bovine expression of his face betokened the quiescent condition of a brain which is not jaded by reading and abstruse reflections. A kind of rustic animality emanated from all his being, tanned by the sun and an open-air life. M. de Souché was an honourable and upright man, in the neutral sense of the words, incapable of doing great harm or great good. Habit and custom ruled his life egotistically, and he conformed to received opinions. He still preserved a tone of authority, from having served in the army, and although really possessing a character of much indecision he gave the impression of being the most deliberate of individuals, thanks to his energetic-looking countenance and heavy moustache.

His country life had rendered him more or less disposed to silence, which, joined to a certain mistrust of himself, allowed him to commit few solecisms of speech; thus he confined himself usually to commonplace and indisputable truisms. Up to the present he had resisted the advances of the *châtelaines* round about who had elderly daughters to get settled in life, but his solitude weighed upon him, yet at his age he feared to excite ridicule. He had come near marrying a plain widow of ripe years, but having made the discovery that she laughed unreservedly at his

avarice—he was only economical, like most provincial folk—he had retired disgusted with this adventure.

However, as he was still a very vigorous, hale man, like all those who have exercised self-control, he could not help feeling in himself sometimes that hunting, the management of his estate, and two solid meals a day, but incompletely filled up his life. And, above all, in the melancholy hours of autumn, when the pure skies of Touraine are still clear and the green woods gradually assume their russet tints, when the purple sunsets make the river flash with gleams of fire—at such times vague and confused aspirations took possession of him, dreams of a conjugal life at once satisfying and soothing. Mme. Eloi Le Martin had well selected her moment.

She had been very careful not to alarm her old friend—as she called him—by talking about the glittering attractiveness of marriage; it would be much better that he should come of himself to the bird-call, and then she would thrust him into the cage. Besides, she had to count upon Alice's justifiable suspicions. Thus, avoiding either direct or veiled allusions to anything of the kind, she limited herself to multiplying the opportunities of meeting, which almost came of themselves, as M. de Souché, who had seen but very little of Mme. Le Martin for several years, was only too disposed to renew their old friendship, and all the more so because the presence of the Brevier ladies rendered the social relationship far more pleasant.

At first they had frightened him a good deal, Mme. Brevier with her queenly air, and Alice so

serious and beautiful ; it was feared that he might not turn up again at La Guette, but he gradually became more tractable, and now they saw him two or three times a week. On the days he couldn't pay them a visit, he recalled himself to their memory by sending them haunches of venison, enormous baskets of fruit—the cultivated the finest pears in the countryside—or baskets of roses to fill every one of the rooms. That morning, he had sent up by one of his gamekeepers a pike weighing ten pounds, just caught, and he had been asked to come and eat it with them the same evening at dinner, without any ceremony.

* Alice, wearing a very simple frock of foulard silk and a big straw hat, was walking in a grove lined with hedges which gently descended to the banks of the Loire, a spot of which she was particularly fond because it reminded her in certain aspects of Rosenoire, which held for her a thousand dear and lingering memories. She could see her father coming to meet her at the end of an avenue of trees, greeting her from afar with a joyful sign, and she compared her thoughts and feelings of that time with those of to-day, modified as they were by sorrow and by the shock which a precocious and bitter experience of human beings and events brings to one. She reproached herself with feeling a kind of torpor, a physical and moral inertia which always beset her in the country. Had she any right to take rest ? And because she had not yet succeeded in carving out an independent career for herself, was she justified in giving up further efforts ? But she also felt that this restful change was essential to her after the profound blows of such a cruel year,

and, carried away in spite of herself by the obscure energies of her youth, she allowed herself to enjoy with ~~all~~ her heart this deliciously serene and luminous nature, where the purity of the atmosphere is such that it seemed to bring into startling relief the contours of the distant landscape and throw back into infinite perspective the softly-melting horizon.

She reached the stone bench which leant against the wall that skirted the public road, and sat down to gaze thoughtfully at the blue Loire. The river spreading out widely into a dead arm, and bordered with sandy banks, might have been taken for a lake at this spot; a small island, covered with thick, close-grass, like an English park, raised opposite her its wooded tops, and was reflected in the opaque mirror of the still waters, whilst beyond, the living, moving waters formed sudden little waves like cut steel. A ferry-boat glided over, looking black in the rays of an obliquely declining sun, and the tiny shadow of a horse and cart was also reflected. Some martins, with tails of a delicate slate colour, flew high in the heavens. Alice sighed, oppressed by the beauty of the hour and the scene. Why does life continue thus its passive way, without troubling about those who are no more, with its perishable moment and fleeting emotion? Why did she herself even, in spite of everything, feel glad at this moment to breathe the air with full lungs?

She thought of her father, and saw Michel again with his roughly hewn face and superb eyes, his expression of stubborn will. He had promised, if he could escape for a couple of days, to pay them a little visit. Would he keep his word? She enjoyed

the respite which existence granted her at the manor of La Guette, this green oasis, so vast that she could lose herself for a whole day in it, and roam about free, recalled only by the double stroke of the bell at meal times. It was evident that her particular welfare was being forgotten; forgotten by her aunt, whose proximity in this spacious abode was less aggressive, less despotic; forgotten by her mother and Raymonde; forgotten by all those surrounding them with their false friendship; forgotten by everything outside this enchanted nature, with its revivifying atmosphere, and its sovereign peace of trees and sky.

There was a sound of carriage-wheels, and turning out of the road, behind some poplar trees, M. de Souché emerged, seated in his victoria, which was being driven by his old coachman. His big grey dog, Stop, was following. Alice slightly inclined her head in answer to the baron's salutation, one which was performed in the old style, with the hat lifted high and swept round to the full length of his arm. At any rate this good fellow was very polite, a sufficiently rare merit, nowadays, she thought, when courtesy is coloured with familiarity and allows the secret and eternal contempt of man to betray itself. Then she was grateful to him for the embarrassment which seized upon him when he was near her, and which was exhibited in fits of silence and extremely commonplace utterances. She saw him without displeasure as without pleasure, with an amiable indifference, only finding him rather tiresome. He never expressed a personal opinion or a spontaneous sentiment; one could have said that he neither thought nor felt

anything of himself; but his polite attentions, his eager desire to please, rendered him bearable, and it was greatly in his favour that his manners were simple. She noticed that he was arriving rather early to-day, and that she was not yet dressed. She crossed to the wing of the castle in which her mother and herself had their rooms. But as she was taking the shortest cut by the smaller lawn, at the corner of an avenue, her aunt Eloi, escorted by the baron, appeared in a *negligé* robe of blue silk, which made her puffy flesh look still harder and sallow. Kiki, limping—some one in the kitchen had slyly dipped his paw in a frying-pan—was following, jogging along in the wake of the big, contemptuous Stop.

"I knew very well we should meet my niece," said Mme. Le Martin, with her kindest attempt at a smile, while M. de Souché presented his respects. After the exchange of a few words, she continued, "You wanted to see the white peacocks. Alice, show M. de Souché the aviary, he hasn't had a good look at the birds, and then return by the conservatory."

The aunt made her escape under the pretence of giving orders. There was the pike—and a splendid one it was—which called for a sauce of the finest and most delicate flavour—and there was a ragout of partridges on which she wanted his opinion. The table provided her with inexhaustible subjects of conversation with the baron, who was like herself a big eater and a gourmand.

He followed Alice docilely, mechanically tapping, with his silver-headed malacca cane, the small metal arches on the lawn.

"Do you like birds, mademoiselle? For myself I only care for them when they are at liberty, or within shot."

Loud cries announced the peacocks, who looked aristocratic and dazzling in their snowy plumage. Behind the wire screens, preening their tuft of feathers, they puffed out their breasts at the sight of visitors; some of them were aloft on perches and their tails streamed down in a white foam; others unfolded and displayed their magnificent fan with a clucking vanity. M. de Souché only accorded them a mediocre admiration.

"They look stupid," he said; "now talk to me about horses and dogs, and there are animals I can understand; they are a man's friends."

He caressed Stop with one or two pats on the neck and seemed to beg for Alice's opinion. She gave a vague answer while passing her hand over the dog's head. M. de Souché looked at her pretty hand and slender arm, then gazed at her face and felt happy that she had caressed his dog. He very much enjoyed the young girl's silent charm; but without being anything of a frivolous character himself, yet her seriousness frightened him, and although he had for a moment thought of a marriage with her, he could not succeed in persuading himself to consider its possibility; at any rate he put aside the notion, for something paternal, in spite of himself, mingled with the sentiments which he wished were more active, and yet which he dared not push further than sympathy and respect. And wasn't there at least thirty years difference in their ages?

Silence once more fell upon them while Alice

led the way to the conservatories. He found his voice again sufficiently to speak of flowers ; he had a passion for them and could not live without them. She answered politely yet distantly. What could there be common between her and him, so different in sentiments and tastes, and separated by such an abyss of age ? The remote suspicion that her aunt had purposely left her alone with him made her shrink within herself. Ah, yes ! that eternal project of marriage ! But they might, however, know that at no price would she marry this elderly man whose title and fortune they praised so highly—and she refused to believe that he himself could pay her the doubtful compliment of considering it.

However, he had occasionally risked allusions to his solitude, to the long country winters, and had consulted her as to what she liked best. And yet she could not possibly entertain such an idea ! But if he should put it into words, she would well know what reply to make. How absurd it was, when she had all her life before her, the unknown, the future, the resources that work would end in bringing her, even the hap-hazards of fate, that they could find no other salvation for her but a wealthy marriage—whether the husband were vulgar, or old, or as much of a foreigner as a Chinaman or a negro !

That Mme. Le Martin, with her unscrupulous and indelicate soul could deem such a calculation possible and advantageous—and summing it up, it was to sell herself, her body, her youth and beauty—was not at all astonishing. But was her mother, who spoke of nothing and who appeared thoughtful after the ridiculous and lamentable

Lelubert episode, was she also instrumental in projecting a similar and second offence?

"Ah!" said M. de Souché, suddenly, whose embarrassment was increasing, "I think I see Mme. Brevier."

Put at their ease by this diversion they looked at her coming towards them, tall and upright, in a grey lawn dress which she wore for the first time since her mourning.

CHAPTER II

JEANNE BREVIER, also, was blossoming out under the influence of the gentle wonder of a Touraine autumn. Alice noticed how well the tone of her costume suited her brilliant complexion, so carefully prepared, and her gold-tinted hair. The unusual brightness of her eyes was due to a drop of belladonna in each of them, a theatrical secret which Laroze had formerly confided to her. But under the subtle artifice of clothes and toilet accessories, she had regained the beauty of her maturity, and developed a wonderfully harmonious bearing, with a firmness of contour just sufficiently indicated, but not too much so, by the perfect fit of her bodice and skirt. Mme. Brevier was enjoying her widowhood in this efflorescence of an Indian summer when the reaction of her energies and coquetry, which had been buried under the habiliments of woe, set in with a complete rehabilitation of her whole being. She had had quite enough of that cloistral existence, and the bitterness of its sorrows and disappointments, which had been so suddenly thrust upon her, made her all the more enjoy the desire of pleasing others and finding herself still young. Thanks to a stoical system of dietary, in which she almost deprived herself of food and drink, she had grown quite slender, her

scales every morning registering the compliment. By means of ice cold douches—which were a torture to her—and forcing herself to walk three hours every day in the park—also a calvary—she rigorously maintained her figure. She smiled in a graceful superior way at M^r de Souché who kissed her hand. Appreciative of all complimentary acts, and finding country life sufficiently boring not to welcome homage from whatever source it came, she exhibited towards the baron a coquettishly protecting manner as if she were enjoying an innocent little game.

Her presence seemed to put him at his ease. How was it that even with all her queenly ways she managed to inspire him with confidence, and give him the wish to tell her everything that passed through his head, whereas Alice's cool affability seemed to paralyze him?

"We must scold you again, monsieur, you are always spoiling us too much," she said.

He blushed like a guilty schoolboy. "Oh yes, the pike!" He went on to explain with sudden volubility, "I caught it at four o'clock this morning. I do the fishing, and Ravaut, my keeper, does the watching. Ah! I give you my word it wasn't an easy matter to haul it on to the punt. The creature struggled like the devil in holy water." Then he added, "But that was nothing to the one I caught last year, a regular shark he was! He nearly bit my thumb off!"

Mme. Brevier's face showed a sympathetic interest which delighted him. Their stroll took them once more in the direction of the aviaries and conservatories and the white peacocks again

uttered their hoarse scream and spread out their tails.

"The beautiful creatures, I dote on them," said Mme. Brevier. "They might be princesses from the Arabian Night's Entertainments."

"Exactly so," answered M. de Souché in a sentimental tone; "I am very fond of them too, and all kinds of birds." Suddenly, remembering his recantation, he turned his head in Alice's direction but she had disappeared, and he had not even noticed her absence, so engrossed had he been with Mme. Brevier's graceful presence.

"Did you go hunting yesterday?" she asked.

"Well no . . . that's to say . . . but I didn't kill anything, so it doesn't count."

He had almost found himself fibbing. What was the good of it, however? Because he did not want to confess that he had returned as he went, so strong was his desire to make a good impression upon her. Why was he wearing on this occasion a new jacket and a straw hat rather too small—"young man's style," as the hat seller at Tours had remarked—if it were not to appear to the best advantage? But which of them did he want to please, the daughter or the mother? He would have found himself extremely embarrassed to answer such a question; at any rate it was not to flirt with Mme. Le Martin.

Mdlle. Duverset's thin flat figure, looking like a melancholy stick of asparagus, appeared in the distance.

"I could wager you anything that she's coming to tell us that tea is ready;" and with a motion of her sunshade Mme. Brevier made a sign to her that

it was all right, upon which she turned on her heel and vanished. She was more unhappy than ever because Mme. Le Martin had been sulking with her for a week past, and didn't even address her a word; this treatment grieved her more than a flood of unjust reproaches.

"What a lovely day it has been," said Mme. Brevier slowly. "You feel that it is one of the last, these days of autumnal beauty."

M. de Souché lowered his head, for he felt what the words suggested, which was the approaching departure of these ladies, their return to Paris. He understood how much he would miss them both.

"Why don't you prolong your visit here? There are capital afternoons even in November?"

She replied in a tone of regret, "We shall be obliged to leave this beautiful country which you have done so much to render pleasant to us, because we have so much to do . . . and my aunt too . . ."

He nodded his head with an approving gesture, struck by those mysterious duties that Paris and the world of society represented. He envied her being so busy, he whom during the misty autumnal evenings, would sit smoking his biggest pipe—his Mary Jane—in the corner of the fireplace. He had a rack full of them, opposite his panoply of sticks, whips, and hunting-crops, and all of them bore female names, those of the infrequent and barren souvenirs of his student and officer's life, for his natural timidity, combined with a superstitious and hygienic fear, had spared him the low intrigues of the tavern and barracks. In the country, after a few haphazard affairs, and with increasing years,

he now had only the companionship of his pipes and his dogs—Stop, and three or four hunting dogs and pointers, the dragging footsteps of his old domestics clearing away the meals, mingled with the tick-tack of the grandfather's clock. At nine o'clock he yawned and retired for the night.

What was the use of his being so rich? Who would profit by it? Some distant nephews probably whom he didn't care for. Then he might be able, during his lifetime . . . doubtless country life preserved him, being without worries, with health and money . . . but was this living? Weren't there very much more desirable pleasures? Theatres, receptions, travel? . . . Paris, which frightened him when he was alone, where he felt himself lost, appeared attractive enough if one had a solid footing there, such as horses, carriages, and a careful housewife, who knew the price of things and looked after the expenditure . . . for what was the good of squandering what one has? It was a crime. And wisely enough besides, they could very well reside six months at Bécassière; you could make up for all the extraneous expenses by this arrangement because the farmyard, the kitchen-garden, and the orchard would lighten the budget. They could receive visitors, and would not be obliged to live like hermits. But it very often happened that one ran the chance of not pleasing the woman who pleased you! It was very stupid to let one's self grow old! But he was strong and robust, and there weren't many to be found like him and the Count of Pressevault—his only friend and a bachelor like himself—who could follow the hounds the livelong day, or hunt the

stag in the forest of La Magne, near Sologne, the count's demesne.

"How is Olympia?" asked Mme. Brevier.

"The day before yesterday she jumped a hedge as high as that." He raised his cane to show the height. "If you had only known her in former times when she used to carry off the prizes in the Riviera races! We made some pretty showings, I can tell you!" And he continued to tell stories—although it was the third time Mme. Brevier had heard it all—of the mare's exploits and prowess. As soon as any one spoke to him of himself or his animals he became inexhaustible; no other subject interested him so much. She lent him a complacent ear, without listening, because she was calculating with much interest, the savings he must have put aside during the past twenty years, living without any expense on the produce of his farm. Doubtless boredom would be considerable at his side, especially during the summer and autumn. But a Parisian winter would be very bearable. He enjoyed an iron health, and had splendid teeth; there were men far more displeasing than he; the woman who would know how to handle him would not be so unhappy after all. To think that that foolish girl, Alice, could . . . it seemed to her that if she were in her place . . .

Tea was served on the terrace. Mme. Le Martin gravely cut off a big piece of soft cake for Kiki, at whom she winked her eye; he was to have his share too! Mdle. Duverset, seated on the edge of her chair, as a woman of no importance, was finishing a narrow piece of embroidery, attached to a piece of green oilcloth,

which brought to one's mind things sad and cold like the surgical dressings in a sick ward or parlour furniture coverings.

"You take two lumps of sugar, don't you?" asked Mme. Brevier, graciously.

M. de Souché inclined his head in the affirmative. As he had done not long since with Alice, he now looked at the mother's white fingers, supple arms, and well-developed bust. Which was the superior of the two, he asked himself, the mother or daughter? The one had her simple youth all complete; the other that harmonious perfection which characterizes the matured woman, who beautifies herself with art and experience, as if she had borrowed from the thousand and one reflections of human beings and things a still more subtle and undulating charm.

His admiration betrayed itself in the involuntary look with which he met Mme. Brevier's eyes. She felt that her prestige had not become lessened, and she enjoyed a sentiment of gratified pride. Yes, she knew she was beautiful, and consequently still young: she had not lived her fill, and there were many hours of brightness and triumph still due to her; many years separated her from horrible old age; she would take care to fill them well as she wanted her revenge! Had she not observed around her women who bloomed afresh several times? thanks to having contrasting destinies in their lives. Mme. Mérienne, for instance, whose firm white shoulders and smooth face one was never tired of admiring, and yet she had been the "beautiful Mérienne" under the Grévy presidency. And there was Mme. Dellus, who at fifty scarcely

looked more than thirty-six ! For Jeanne Brevier, the future never represented at the moment anything well defined, nothing more than a dim mirage which she hoped intensely to see taking form and colour. In the meanwhile she enjoyed the passing hour, clear and warm ; the vivid pink of the flower-beds on the bright green lawns under the iridescent shower of the revolving water-sprinkler ; and she was surprised to think that in her new gown, a very pretty shade, she was the same woman whom only a year since—yes, already nearly a year—the thunderbolt had struck with an undeserved disaster, depriving her at one fell blow of husband, fortune, friends . . . By a very just turn of the wheel of fate why should she not recover all she had lost ? Friends would return with the possession of wealth and a husband ! What husband ?

She looked at M. de Souché ; his strong hairy hand with its square nails was holding a cup of delicate Chinese porcelain and he was slowly masticating and enjoying a slice of cake ; the tendons of his red neck worked up and down, and above his thick moustache could be seen his nostrils, striated with little purple veins, moving with his respirations. An expression of animal peace was imprinted upon his face. With a sudden feeling of sadness, Mme. Brevier lowered her eyes. She saw once more another man, a dear companion, of a different race and different soul. Would she have the heart to renounce that loyal memory ? Could she accept the intimate and painful conditions of a new yoke, the advantages of which she would have to pay for ? It caused her a moment of

profound uneasiness and one which she feared to investigate. Besides, what would be the good of it?

At first M. de Souché had not thought of her, nor she of him. Alice alone was to be the cause—and to be perfectly just, it was quite true that he did not appear his age, he was so well preserved—but, Great Heavens! one must not exaggerate the importance of certain things. . . . And as the Baron once more raised his eyes to her, she lowered her own; before this man, still robust, an emotion, which never quite dies in a woman's breast, the instinct of pleasing and conquering, took possession of her. With these contradictory feelings of humiliation and pride there was mingled the dumb distress of ransom paying; but the desire to live as she had understood the word live, ostentatiously, gold flowing through her fingers and returning in the shape of a luxurious and sumptuous vanity, that desire was stronger than all else, and overcame her regrets and her repugnance. Was it her fault if she had no other resource but herself?

Alice, framed in the high glass doorway, appeared in a fresh gown with an autumn tea-rose thrust in her waist band. M. de Souché, smiling, looked at her coming up, and thought to himself how beautiful she was! And with such an air of modesty too. . . . No, he could not aspire to such a marvellous creature; the secret laws which govern human beings and couple youth with youth was opposed to it. . . . She might be his daughter, this young girl; his daughter, why not? At any rate, his step-daughter. And when he turned his eyes once again to the queenly Jeanne Brevier, whose

face had suddenly become grave because of a spasm of involuntary jealousy—for she also recognised and envied the power of youth—he said to himself, “You will remain a bachelor, my old Souché. Such a beautiful woman is not for you!”

Mme. Le Martin clamoured for her game of bridge, for she was a fierce player and a bad one.

“Come and sit beside me, Alice, you will bring me good luck,” she said.

It seemed to M. de Souché that fate, even in this puny matter, decided his choice. He sat beside Mme. Brevier and the attentive silence maintained during the course of the game was only broken by disjointed exclamations: “Shall I play . . . ?”—“I double”—“Will you redouble?”—and some recriminations on account of M. de Souché’s triumphant series of successes.

“Grand slam in hearts,” he exclaimed, and these words assumed in his heavy brain a prophetic and propitious meaning, while Mme. Brevier’s smile ran through his being like a caress. “Oh! oh!” thought Mme. Le Martin, who, happened to be looking at them, and her rage at losing was gradually appeased by new horizons opening up to her internal vision. Just then Mdlle. Duverset made her appearance, holding a blue telegram which she handed to Mme. Brevier who, after feeling something of a shock, said—

“My dear aunt, Raymonde, who we were only expecting in France next month, will be here the day after to-morrow . . . it’s her health . . . she cannot support the heat at Naples and asks whether you can give her your hospitality.”

“Why, certainly,” answered Mme. Le Martin;

"poor little thing!" And over her puffy face passed an expression of distorted pleasure, for she snuffed up and sucked in the agreeable perfume of a love affair and a scandal. Oh, it was not without a reason that Le Vigreux had procured a divorce! He had been recognized, a mysterious stranger in Naples, and Mme. de Boyséon, who knew of it, had added some very uncomplimentary remarks which she repeated everywhere. What about Gilles? Well, well! . . . She saw at once that Jeanne and Raymonde between them were going to procure her an appreciable excitement and were pledging their fates on a new shuffle of the cards. At the thought of these games for good or ill, that human beings play, with wealth or poverty, honour or dishonour, the ups and downs of success or defeat, for the stake, she experienced an ugly sensation of delight.

"It's very amusing," she exclaimed, pushing the cards from her, and no one knew whether she was alluding to bridge or something else.

CHAPTER III

WEARING her hat, which was enveloped in a long motor-veil, Mme. Brevier, who was setting out to meet Raymonde at the railway-station, said to Alice, before starting—

“Think well over this matter. You know what freedom your father and I always allowed you. M. de Souche is by no means indifferent to you. I quite conceive that a reasonable marriage such as this doesn't arouse your enthusiasm, but the actual counts for just as much in life as the sentimental. Have you any prejudices against him? He is no longer young, but he has other merits. It is a chance that perhaps you will never find again. I decided to speak to you about it before your sister's arrival because I shall be very much absorbed in her affairs, if I can judge from her recent letters. Raymonde is unhappy, and is going to be separated from her husband.”

Alice looked at her mother and in a gentle but resolute tone of voice, said—

“I am determined to marry by myself, in my own way, in my own time, or not to get married at all, unless I marry the man of my choice. I have no wish to make an ill-assorted union like Raymonde, and hard work and solitude frighten me far less than such a marriage as that.”

"But M. de Souché. . . ."

"M. de Souché does not love me, and it would be impossible for me to care for him. There is something monstrous in such a disparity between us from every point of view."

"You exaggerate. . . ."

"Monstrous, I repeat. In other respects nothing prevents me from rendering him justice, he is not altogether displeasing."

"That is so, isn't it?" said Mme. Brevier, eagerly.

"I only consider him commonplace; rather vain and egotistical, and yet, all the same, possessed of an easy good nature and capable of an attachment. It is quite possible that a woman would find material happiness in his society if she secured influence over him; but it would have to be a woman, not a young girl."

Mme. Brevier remained thoughtful; these last words had struck her.

"Perhaps you are right," she said.

"And I believe," said Alice, with a smile which was not wanting in irony, "that if there is any one here with whom he is in love, it is not I."

"What foolishness!"

But Mme. Brevier blushed like a child, for whenever she attempted to accustom herself to a practical realization of this marriage of reason, which she preached to her daughter, would she herself have the courage to submit to it with the scruples, the honest fidelity, the objections that in spite of everything surged up in her memory from the depths of her early training? As long as Alice was not settled in life, would there not

be something shocking about it? What would people say? However, widows who married again were numerous enough. But would she not age quickly at this particular period of her life? and what a saddening thought it was to think of growing old beside a stranger. What was the use of riches if it were not to prolong her beauty, to be admired and envied? During the past three days black thoughts, a moral and physical crisis, ravaged her being. She felt that thousands of strong and tenacious ties with the past were being stretched and broken. She had taken up Pierre's photograph from the chimney-piece to replace it on her writing-table, and she scrutinized his forehead, his eyes, his strong and kindly expression. By the side of him, M. de Souché seemed old and ugly. But life is life, an accident of which one is not responsible for the materials! If she wanted to become rich again, had she the choice, could she find another opportunity?

"I have spoken to you, because I thought I ought to," she said. "It happens that the Baron has partly let me see . . ."

"That he would like to marry me? That I cannot believe! And if it is so, discourage him. . . But it is not I whom he is thinking of, I repeat . . ."

"Really, Alice, one would think . . . M. de Souché is very polite, quite gallant indeed, but you cannot suppose that he has any regards for me?"

Alice looked at her full in the face and said, in a low voice—

"Yes, I do."

There was silence between them. Feelings of confusion, pride, and maternal authority were delivered up to battle in Mme. Brevier's heart. Must she blush before her own daughter? How many times she had been wounded by her penetrating glances, her expressive fits of silence! How many times she had braced herself against her implied reproaches! In a troubled, but ironical tone, she asked—

"And would such an event, supposing it ever took place, seem very ridiculous to you?"

"No."

"But you would not be able to understand," continued Mme. Brevier, "how I could bring myself, after much hesitation, to make him a partner?"

"Yes," replied Alice, but not immediately.

"Let me know what you are thinking, then. Would you be angry with me, would you respect me less? Don't let us talk without understanding one another; can't you answer?"

"Don't ask me any questions, mamma. Every human being is responsible for his own actions, and only renders account of them to his conscience."

Mme. Brevier slightly shrugged her shoulders. "Then you would blame me? I prefer to know what you think, as I am treating you like a friend and consulting you. You feel that I am not in love with M. de Souché . . . at my age, you know, I should only make a marriage of convenience. Would it be repugnant for you to have him as a step-father?"

Alice made an almost imperceptible gesture. As she had decided to live very soon outside her

family, such miserable affairs as this were not worrying her. Her reason admitted this painful bargain, which was so repugnant in her eyes. It was a question of character, temperament, and difference of soul. Be it so. But that which protested in her, that which aroused feelings of sadness and revolt, was something else. It was a sentiment, intense, pure, and proud, a sentiment of veneration towards the departed one; the moral certainty that having shared wealth and happiness with her husband, her mother ought now to resign herself to the reverse condition of things.

Poverty in perspective—and it was still a poverty that would have meant luxury for many—at least remained noble. But to sell yourself, and to sell yourself for money! Ugh! And to this ordinary sort of being, a man whom nothing raised above the common herd, neither great virtues, nor talents, nor prestige! Her mother admitted that she did not love M. de Souché. So much the worse; at least that would have been an excuse. Alice might have suffered a pang of filial jealousy on account of the dead, so soon replaced, but, strictly speaking, she could have understood and forgiven an infatuation of the heart and mind.

"You don't answer me; what are you thinking of?"

"Of papa . . ."

"Ah!" interrupted Mme. Brevier, who turned pale. "You are unjust. At your age one doesn't know life. You are judging me. Don't you think I am to be pitied?"

Alice lowered her eyes and did not reply.

There was a discreet knock at the door, and it was announced that Mme. Le Martin was waiting.

"There's no sense in all this just now," said Mme. Brevier, very quickly. "If there is any opportunity we will speak about it again. Won't you kiss me?"

They exchanged a cold kiss, and Mme. Brevier, feeling comforted—had she not fulfilled every claim that feminine loyalty demanded, even to the point of regretting having done so; for what was the use of these premature explanations?—descended the staircase, filling it with the rustling sound of her silk skirts.

Alice, standing at the window, saw her mother seat herself at the side of her aunt. The motor snorted, and the chauffeur, sinking his head like a vicious-tempered bull, started the machine. Did Eugene drink, she wondered, because he was so red in the face? They moved off, and suddenly disappeared. Alice turned away . . . Was it possible that her mother . . . ? She straightened herself, but could not overcome her emotion, and silently wept.

When the motor, sounding its horn, reappeared with the rumbling of a storm between the sycamore trees of the avenue, Alice, who had bathed her eyes, was standing at the foot of the flight of steps to welcome her sister. Never had Raymonde looked prettier, and, considering she was an invalid, her fatigue was most ravishingly becoming to her! A delightful travelling costume of tiny check design was moulded to her figure, and a red toque was placed daringly on her thick golden hair.

"Good afternoon, my little sister. How are

you? How well you are looking!" And she busied herself with little fits of laughing, half-spoken phrases, exclamations of pleasure. "Oh, auntie, what a delightful old manor house! . . . They've forgotten my bag! And this view of the Loire! Oh no, here it is!"

"Pay attention now, you awkward creature," suddenly called out Mme. Le Martin to the chauffeur, in a tone of anger. "You almost ran over Kiki! And, moreover, you exceeded the speed limit, you know our contract—twenty francs fine, that I shall deduct from your wages!"

Eugene stared at her. He hadn't his usual appearance. With bloodshot eyes, his rough plebeian face deeply inflamed by full-blooded food and strong undiluted drink, he stared at her with an expression of haughty contempt, then, bending his back, put the machine in motion, and shot off like an arrow to the stables.

"He will crush my begonia bulbs," screamed Aunt Eloi. "I don't know what's been the matter with that man lately, but to-morrow I shall give him notice in double quick time."

A present that Raymonde had brought in her little bag for her, a very beautiful Neapolitan coral brooch, cheered her up.

"That's very kind of you, my lovely niece."

And attracted once again by Raymonde's charm, she overwhelmed her with caresses.

"And what day is Le Vigreux coming to see us?" she asked her.

"Imagine," said Raymonde, turning towards Alice. "In the train from Paris here I travelled with M. Le Vigreux; he was going down to the

Ismaels to have some hunting, and promised to come over here and pay us a visit on his return, on Friday, may be."

She did not remark the sorrowful and reproachful expression of Alice's face. The aunt was laughing in her sleeve; she was no dupe as to this chance meeting, and Mme. Brevier preserved her appearance of perfect worldly serenity. Raymonde's presence revived in her the impressions of their former times together, when they used to shop in each other's company and tell one another all about the visits they had paid. She was very glad to see her again—to breathe from her presence the fever of travel, movement, gaiety. With Raymonde her youthfulness revived, and as to Le Vigreux? Well, she had decided to know only what her daughter chose to tell her. Raymonde was old enough to know how to conduct herself, and if she could some day recover her liberty, and if Le Vigreux was still in love with her, she would not be the one to find fault with such a marriage. Of course, Gilles remained, but . . . !

"It's perfectly abominable," repeated the aunt, much later on in the evening, when under the pretence of putting Raymonde to bed, she led the way to her room with Mme. Brévier. A clear fire was burning on the hearth in the room—the most beautiful in the Manor House, decorated with pale-blue figured silk—and the rosy flames cast dancing reflections over the white face and white dressing-gown of the traveller, who was drawing off her rings and placing them in a Venetian glass cup. "Gilles is a scoundrel, I always thought he was!"

Raymonde had finished enumerating the grievances of her sojourn in Naples, presenting in its darkest aspect their incompatibility of temper, and describing their frequently recurring tragic scenes.

Mme. Le Martin shrugged her shoulders with astonishment.

"Tell me, dearest, hasn't he got a mistress? He ought to have one."

Raymonde raised her eyes to the ceiling, which could be interpreted, at choice, either as an avowal of her ignorance, or as a testimony of her martyrdom.

"And he has struck you—has dared to strike you?" continued the aunt, who, edified by the morality of her niece, did not, however, entertain any doubt as to the truthfulness of her complaints.

Mme. Brevier, indignant, shook her head. Raymonde undid her sleeve, and showed a spotless arm.

"Look! it was there; for fifteen days I had a bruise there. I thought he had broken my arm."

All three of them bent over the invisible spot, and believed they saw the shadow of it. Was Raymonde lying for the mere pleasure of lying—the habit she had adopted with her husband—or was she doing so in order to draw upon herself a protecting commiseration? It is certain that she could not do otherwise than to accuse Gilles calumniously, and invent fictitious ill-treatment—real injuries in fact. As far as her wrongs were concerned, she judged it useless to reveal them to these ladies as they to investigate too closely. Before everything the family solidarity! As for Mme. Le Martin, there was no mistake about what

she believed, for Gilles deserved all he had got, of whatever nature! Always conventional, Mme. Brevier prudently allowed this latter doubt, to remain in the shadow, much preferring not to receive any enlightenment on the subject.

"To-morrow I will telephone to Aurandon and Vapaille to come and confer with us," declared the aunt. "You are going to do me the pleasure of procuring a divorce, my treasure, against that individual!"

CHAPTER IV

ALTHOUGH these last weeks had been a stormy time for her—Gilles by turns showing contempt, returning to fits of anger, or lowering himself to supplications—Raymonde did not conceal from herself the difficulties of the situation. She could justify herself to her own people, and even to the world, in piling up her many grievances, more or less veracious, against her husband. Nothing was easier; but courts of law require witnesses and proofs.

Maitre Aurandon and Maitre Vapaille—the lawyer, thin and dried up; the barrister, familiar and talkative, with his ferrety nose and sarcastic eyes—both of whom had docilely run down to La Guette at the end of a few days, had not failed to press this knowledge upon their client. They scented the fact that all the wrongs were not on M. d'Arbelles' side, and if he were to set up a cross plea, a most disastrous light might be thrown upon Mme. d'Arbelles' conduct.

"You must only plead," said Maitre Aurandon, "on a sure thing."

"The best kind of separations," added Maitre Vapaille, "are those arranged by mutual consent; the court ratifies a mutual understanding."

"Don't risk," they repeated together, "a dangerously aggressive attitude."

"Unless," argued Maître Aurandon, in a lugubrious and sententious tone—the same that he employed for saying, "I should very much like some strawberries—"—"unless you intend to gain time by withholding yourself for the longest period possible from the necessity of living under the conjugal roof."

"Or," interpolated Maître Vapaille, maliciously, "unless you are resolved to run the risk of reprisals, which M. d'Arbelles will be tempted to take; for once the law proceedings are put in motion, he will not have to exercise any particular caution."

"You must succeed in persuading him that you cannot any longer live together, and that your common interests are better served by a definite separation," said Maître Aurandon. "Exert all your efforts to effect that through friends and intermediaries; we are entirely at your service."

"Would you like me to set off for Naples?" proposed Vapaille, with eagerness.

Mme. Brevier, seated at Mme. Le Martin's side, as in the shelter of a massive fortress, thought, with bitterness, but also with triumph, how very different the attitude of these gentlemen would be if, instead of being entertained at the manor, fed on dainty dishes and tempted by handsome fees they received with lofty indifference, hurried unceremoniously from the entrance door of their office to its exit, a Raymonde poverty stricken and unsupported. And, thinking it over, she consecrated to gold, the sovereign master of all consciences and the key of all

devotions, a foolish kind of worship, the superstitious veneration of a being who had almost lost his God, and has found him again, beneficent, dazzling, and warm like the sun.

"Would not the wiser way be, by prolonging your actual absence, to bring your husband to consent to the legal rupture?"

"But since that is precisely what he will not do," objected Madame Le Martin, impatiently.

Obstacles irritated her, persuaded as she was that everything ought to smooth itself out because she was accustomed to seeing her fellow-creatures give way to her caprices. No doubt there was possibly one means of settling matters with Gilles, and very cautiously both Raymonde and Mme. Brevier had referred to it, namely, the restitution of his patrimony, and a liquidation of their common interests on the basis of their one-time prosperity, which would deprive him of the most valuable, if unacknowledged, reason for his refusal; but to all that Mme. Le Martin lent a deaf ear. Let Raymonde get head over ears in trouble, let Alice marry without any dowry, let Jeanne Brevier manage her existence as she best could; it was quite enough to keep open house for them, and to cover them with her protection!

Raymonde made a careless gesture. Everything would arrange itself. For each day its particular trouble. To be free of her husband—he had been obliged to let her go on the formal choice she had given him—of her mother's protection or Le Vigreux's—to have no longer before her that face, full of reproach and hatred, consoled her. This semi-freedom left her at leisure, and did not interfere

too much with her love-affair. Passing through Paris, shut up for twenty-four hours in the little flat in the rue du Général-Foy, full of the joy of seeing Mark again, she had taken courage. Without hesitating any longer, as a perfectly natural thing becomes a habit, she had accepted the blue banknotes with which she had found her little handbag crammed when she had started on her journey. They did not represent money to her—at actual money she laughed heartily—but heaps of useless purchases, new hats and clothes. She had found time to visit Laquert's establishment, which, for a long time past, had had its accounts with her secretly settled by another than Gilles.

She also had drawn from the magic season of the year a renewal of ardent beauty, something bolder in her glance, and something more assured in her movements. One could almost have said that she bore about her the triumph of her passion.

Negotiations now began to open up with Gilles. Aunt Eloi herself condescended to write him a severe letter with her own hand, in which she invited him to yield to the legitimate wishes of all the family. The answer was not long in coming, and was bitter and explicit, with an abundance of edifying details. Mme. Le Martin made a festival out of it for herself, which she had the generosity to allow her niece to share; but Mme. Brevier opposed a frigid incredulity, asserting that she would not believe these accusations from Raymond's own lips, who was quite capable of calumniating herself out of bravado. At the worst, a husband did not make a boast of this

kind of thing, and Gilles thus clearly showed his indelicacy and his stupidity.

She manifested a determination not to express any opinion on this delicate matter. Raymonde's secret belonged to herself alone, and too many accusations might justify revenge on his part. Why did Gilles show so much obstinacy in keeping her by force? What could he expect?

Aunt Eloi petted Raymonde, and called her a "poor little dear." But what would happen if he pushed her to extremes? This question which the aunt put to her when they were having a *tête-à-tête* talk together, Raymonde made no difficulty in answering frankly—

"Gilles would be responsible for what would happen—the crowning scandal! Le Vigreux was a free man, and she would go and live openly with him; in which case a divorce procured against her by Gilles would not prevent their marrying later. Besides, a free union, for very rich people, didn't differ very much from marriage," and she cited numberless instances.

Mme. Le Martin shook her head. Doubtless such a resolution was very heroic, but where was the necessity? Why get herself spoken about, and injure her mother and sister? Even if she continued as Gilles' wife she had only to live as a separated woman in her own apartments, and preserve appearances, having the right to her own set of friends, and any particular one! The world was so willing to shut its eyes, provided you didn't want to shock it openly! And she concluded to assign to Le Vigreux, on his approaching visit, the crimson-plush suite of rooms, rather sombre,

true, but contiguous to the pale-blue figured-silk suite.

The lawyer and barrister having left the manor—in any case nothing could be done before the reopening of the Courts—Raymonde had only to wait and long for Mark's arrival, he being detained at the Ismaels, and whilst doing so she amused herself by watching the touchingly serious court which M. de Souché was paying her mother.

Her purely selfish conception of life allowed her to face, with an unusual freedom of mind, the advantages and disadvantages, quite hypothetical, of such a marriage. She would not have been exactly able to determine them for herself, however voracious and irresistible might be her desire for riches, and in as far as it might be a mistake, it was not such a serious one as if one were young and attractive. She looked upon herself, moreover, as outside such conjectures, since reciprocal love purified in her eyes a freedom of action as profitable as it was little calculated—at least this was the illusion she gave herself about it. But whilst admitting that her mother, still a beautiful woman, could find a better match, she had too much common sense not to recognize that M. de Souché's sober-minded maturity and equanimity of disposition, as well as the solid condition of his wealth, might present to the dominating mind of a very feminine woman, sure of her empire over him, a very acceptable prospect. The filial scruples that Alice entertained never entered her thoughts. Why mix up such widely varying sentiments? Platonic fidelity to a memory did not necessarily exclude a forced acceptance of the present con-

ditions. She quite understood that her mother might shrink frightened before the following alternatives, either a gilded and precarious servitude with her aunt, or a solitude so commonplace that, for one of the society queens of yesterday, it was equivalent to suicide.

On one occasion her mother said to her, "Then you don't consider the notion such a foolish one?"

"Why no, mamma!" and laughingly she added, "the Baron will be very presentable when you have chosen his neckties for him and recommended him a tailor."

"Yes," answered Mme. Brevier, and stopped, for she was just about mentioning the name of the well-known firm which formerly tailored her husband. She looked at Raymonde, who was really a daughter of hers, and who she was right to prefer because there was so much affinity between them, and such a secret mutual understanding united them.

"You, at least, understand, you do!"

And the affectionate way in which she uttered the words betrayed her bitterness towards Alice.

"Well, you see, mamma, one must be philosophical," said Raymonde in a wise tone of voice.

Mme. Brevier acquiesced with a look of tender maternal admiration. The sparkling rays of a diamond which she did not recognize, attracted her eyes.

"You have got on a splendid ring."

"Yes," answered Raymonde, lifting her pretty hand in order that Mme. Brevier could have a better view of it on her finger, which was also a

beautiful object, with its little pink shining nail and ivory tip.

"Splendid," repeated Mme. Brevier, not without a fleeting dart of envy. But she asked no questions, and Raymonde did not divulge who had given it to her. She drew back her hand, saying playfully, "Now go and make yourself beautiful, mamma; your admirer is coming to dinner." Mme. Brevier blushed at the words.

"I wonder who is coming here?" she exclaimed.

The sputtering detonations of a motor-cycle resounded; it was Le Vigreux dropping in upon them unexpectedly. Raymonde's face was transfigured. She made but one bound down the staircase, and arrived the first to greet him.

"You! What a happy surprise!"

He laughed all over his energetic face, with his bold eyes and with his sound teeth. The open air had tanned him, and he breathed out love and health.

"Dearest!" he said, in a low voice.

Dragging along her huge mass of flesh, Mme. Le Martin appeared.

"Where is your luggage?" she asked. "We are not going to let you run away again."

His luggage? Oh! a conveyance was bringing it from Tours, as he intended to stay a few days.

"That's all right," answered Aunt Eloi. Le Vigreux was one of the few men whom she took seriously. She felt a mixture of admiration and fear for him.

"Raymonde, you must do the honours! The staircase, with my old legs, you know!"

In the crimson-plush suite, with drawn bolt, Mark and Raymonde embraced each other.

"I thought you were never coming," she said.

"I, too, have been counting the days. . . ."

"You love me?"

"Madly!" and he covered her brow, her cheeks, her eyelids, and lips with kisses.

CHAPTER V

THE next day, M. de Souché—at whose residence they were to take luncheon—arrived in his victoria to fetch the ladies.

"Auntie," said Raymonde, who had an adorable appearance of languor about her, "if it makes no difference to you, I will drive with M. de Souché and Alice, as I rather fear the shaking of the motor;" and, turning to Mark, she continued, "You will keep us company on the bracket seat? That's all right, isn't it, M. de Souché, you will let us have your carriage? As a reward you will go in the motor with auntie and mamma."

He bowed, too polite to make any protest, but disappointed. Faithful to the old sports, he had given up the bicycle after his first spill, and motor-cars were particularly objectionable to him. He had a hatred of empty space, and to feel himself projected forward, with the constant dread of an accident, caused him to suffer from a perpetual feeling of uneasiness. And, what was more, he felt perfectly safe with his old Joseph driving, while for Mme. Le Martin's chauffeur he felt an unreasoning distrust. Eugène, with his look of overflowing robustness, as if he were bursting from his livery, with his plebeian parvenu insolence, offended the country

squire in him, accustomed to the consideration of his people as master of the soil.

"All right! Get up, Baron," called out Mme. Le Martin, "we shall go but a very little quicker than they. Now you understand, Eugène? The same speed as the horses, only a little in front of them."

The chauffeur made no reply. Since he had been threatened with notice, his face remained of the same heightened colour, he being more often drunk than not, with the self-controlled drunkenness of a well-regulated machine. He brooded over his rancorous hatred, filled with a humiliation and rage which he devoured in silence. Emancipated from the workshop, and depraved by a life of bourgeois domesticity, gorged to the extent of disgust by good living, and arrived at the point of despising both himself and others, he cursed his general lack of culture, at the same time feeling a certain pride in having the control of human lives. For, after all, he held within his hands the fate of these beings confided to his skill, and if the desire took possession of him . . . !

At certain rough expressions of "the old woman"—as he called Mme. Le Martin—he felt awaken in him the ferocity of the primitive creature, of that which slumbers in the vicious working man until the hour of sudden mad rages, whipped into activity by anarchist pamphlets, and alcohol, gangrened by the vices with which he accuses his employers—gains the mastery over him.

"What a beautiful day!" said the aunt. "Oh, great heavens, there's Kiki barking! Stop, Eugène, you know very well you were forgetting Kiki!"

The dog having been picked up, M. de Souché

could gaze at Mme. Brevier at his ease. She looked still younger, and he did not grow tired of admiring her. To-day he would certainly profit by the dispersal of his guests through the park, and risk a positive declaration, which had been put off from time to time by his feeling of awkwardness. He would offer her his hand, quite frankly, with a few hesitating words, more or less well chosen, but they would come from his heart. With the impatience of a young man he wanted that moment to come, the moment that would relieve him of an oppressing doubt. Supposing she were to refuse him? He had fallen in love with her—he thought constantly of her, she came between the landscape and him . . . if he rode Olympia to visit one of his farms, it was Mme. Brevier who appeared in the distance, on the threshold of the barn. She sprang up behind the clumps of trees in the English garden. With furtive steps, as light as the leaves falling in the alleys, she flitted along the marble-paved corridors. And even in the clouds of smoke, round the little bowl of his big pipe, she appeared like an ephemeral shadow.

At the turnings, by leaning out, one could see the victoria following, about a hundred yards behind, at a steady pace, and Raymonde waving a little greeting with her tan-coloured sunshade. The road bifurcated at a certain point, and la Bécassière could be reached by either one.

"Take the one to the right," said the aunt, "it is the shorter." Eugène turned to the left. "Don't you hear when I speak to you? I said, to the right! to the right! Don't you know what that means, to the right?"

The chauffeur turned half round and said, "I heard you all right."

Mme. Le Martin could not believe her ears, for none ever dared to resist her to the face. An ugly expression distorted her countenance. Within her were moving the despotic instincts of the old-time nobles, who had their serfs whipped and tortured.

"Turn back at once," she insisted in a hoarse voice.

"I cannot," answered Eugène in a sullen tone; his bent back and arms akimbo round the steering-wheel betrayed a fixed resolution.

"I order you to take the other road."

"We shall get there just as quick by putting on speed." And, with an extra turn of the wheel, the motor started forward, the wind buffeting the faces of the occupants, who were already feeling uneasy by this passage of arms, Madame Brevier startled, and M. de Souché not daring to interfere.

"Go slowly, I tell you," ordered Madame Le Martin.

"I want more air," answered the chauffeur tranquilly, and the motor accelerated its speed still more, the fields flying past in a reverse sense. Madame Brevier's blue veil, which kept her hat fastened on, came undone and floated in waves around her, *à la* Loie Fuller.

"Stop! Stop!" called out Madame Le Martin, exasperated, and also terrified. She had the feeling that the motor, ordinarily so supple, so gently regulated to the slightest movement, had suddenly become a mad beast, a blind force set loose. She looked back, and no longer saw the victoria but as an imperceptible spot, right away on the horizon.

The green masses of a forest ran against them and swallowed them up; they ripped down a road with grassy slopes on either sides at a giddy pace, the motor having got beyond control.

"That's enough, Eugène," shouted the aunt.

"Enough, I tell you! Why don't you obey?" also shouted M. de Souché, in a voice of thunder.

Kiki barked with all his might, his coat bristling and ears standing straight up.

"You, first of all, you're a nuisance," said the chauffeur, and clutching the dog by the head, he threw it hurtling into the air. They had already gone too far to hear its howl of distress or see its fall. A village was traversed like a flash of lightning, then a bridge. The peasants, stupefied, had only the time to perceive some women making desperate motions. The country opened up once more, and the motor sped on like a cannon-ball. An obstacle defined itself on the road. Was it a cow? An old woman? There was no time to distinguish before a splitting shock was felt.

"He is mad," groaned Madame Le Martin, convulsed with terror.

"He's drunk," retorted M. de Souché, who standing up, and his hat flying off, brought down his heavy fists on Eugène's shoulders with the words, "Stop, or I shall strangle you!"

"Let me alone, let me alone, or I shall do you an injury." And he sneered enigmatically. "You see well enough I am only having a bit of fun!"

"Will you stop, I tell you?" repeated M. de Souché, hesitating whether or not to deal him a stunning blow with his fist. But what would become of them if he did? If they only knew how

to handle the machine! But he had no time to think, for a violent shock pitched him head foremost into a ploughed field. As though suddenly without ballast, the motor, which no longer seemed to obey anything, either human strength or mechanical force, plunged down an embankment and capsized.

"Eugène, my dear Eugène," wept Madame Le Martin, discomposed, green and dying, "take pity on us. Look, my friend, my niece is taken ill, do you want to kill us? . . . Have mercy, my little Eugène, I will give you all you want, a thousand francs, ten thousand, twenty thousand, stop, for pity's sake!"

But Eugène heard nothing more, so completely seized was he by the madness of his revenge, by that frenzy of speed of which he had been deprived for so long, unconscious of danger, almost courting it, so beside himself that when Madame Brevier, sufficiently restored to murmur, "We are lost," he replied, "I don't care a d——!"

However his *sang froid* returned to him, and he gradually sobered down, his vengeance appeased. He had only wanted to frighten them, these "females," to offer them this parting present on his last day of service; rather than remain in that "dirty box" any longer. He had tried to curb the motor, but the mad creature had got beyond obeying him. Clinging fast to the wheel, tightening it with all his might, he had also seen the gulf in front of them, six hundred yards away, then two hundred, then fifty, a deep railway embankment yawning, the final somersault—then death!

With a formidable lurch, he had thrown the iron monster against a little signalman's house,

which was partly demolished in the sinister crash. With one blow his skull had been crushed, and when some passers-by ran up to raise the two helpless women, it was discovered that Madame Brevier, bleeding from the breaking of the glass windows, had not broken a limb, but Madame Le Martin's face and body was reduced to a mass of red jelly.

CHAPTER VI

A FORTNIGHT later, with her face and hands still enveloped in bandages—she would not be disfigured, fortunately—Madame Brevier could leave her bed where the doctors had condemned her to absolute rest, as being the only thing capable of calming down her frightfully nervous condition, a semi-delirium without sleep, a perpetual trembling, sudden cries. Whilst being settled by Raymonde and Alice on a big chair, heaped up with pillows, she fainted, which was due as much to physical weakness as to the knowledge of her restoration to life, of the certainty of being safe and sound. To be living! What a light and gentle thing, when one has almost descended into the pit, and a providential hand has drawn you out of it! As if she had never before admired their glorious colours, she now gazed at the tawny chestnuts and hazel trees of the park, the flowers in their red baskets, the fading grass. Everything in her room pleased her as if they were new and pretty things she had just acquired. She had indeed the intimate feeling of finding herself more at home there than before; she experienced a sensation of unexpected security and, although still half awakened, of pride and power.

If there had been any doubt about it at all the

assiduous deference with, which she had been treated by Maître Labric on his visits, the particular consideration of those who waited upon her, the letters of condolence she had received, but badly disguising their congratulations, all this and more confirmed and strengthened the new prestige which, in the eyes of the world, threw a nimbus around the natural inheritor of Madame Le Martin's millions. It was all in vain that she chased from her thoughts, as premature and improper, the happiness that she was feeling about it; the fixed idea pursued her, the magic thought, "I am rich, rich, rich!" And she had become rich through the sole force of fate, without having done anything wrong; or soiled her conscience. She had paid dearly enough for this big prize, which had come before its time, but that could ever be discounted because she had all but missed enjoying it. To think of it, and a shiver would run throughout her body, her eyes would close with fright before the terrible vision—that flight towards the abyss when she had felt on her temples the icy wind of death! No, never again, never would she drive in a motor! She tried her utmost to shake herself free from the obsession! When would she ever be blind to the fleeing devouring landscape in which, with tumultuously bursting heart, they were being swallowed up, or be freed from the terror of the tragic struggle, that awful sensation of a living fall, of a human crash?

She could not help admiring herself for having lived through it! The catastrophe inspired her less with pity towards her aunt than with commiseration towards herself. Such an end brought

before her eyes her own death, and in thinking over what she might have lost she thought bitterly of the danger she had only just escaped. And it wanted but very little more! Her pity for the dead was lessened by the thought that her aunt had not had the time to suffer, and, in spite of herself, she was consoled by the inevitable consequences which this disaster had contained. In provoking the mad wrath of that man, had not her aunt drawn down upon herself, upon them both, the thunderbolt which had also struck her, Madame Brevier, although innocent, as well as Madame Le Martin who was hard upon her servitors; and therefore hated by them?

She pitied her aunt the less who, after all, was the responsible author of the fatality, than the unfortunate M. de Souché, who was confined to his bed with two broken ribs, and a painful sprain in his back—another who had been saved by a miracle! or than Kiki annihilated, or than the poor miserable peasant woman, who had been partly crushed under her load of faggots; an old woman without any family—the responsibilities resulting would not be the least part of the terrible accident! As for Eugène, he had expiated his crime!

After all, life had not always been very comfortable with the aunt; and Mme. Brevier was obliged to exert a veritable effort of justice in order to balance the services received with the humiliations endured. But ought she not to forget the evil, and be grateful only for the good? Generously enough she could absolve from wrong-doing what had been made up for by this sudden investiture of wealth! Rich at last! Richer than she had ever been in

the time of her splendour, for there was nothing insecure or fluctuating about this; she could dip her hands into solid gold coins, rustle the little blue banknotes one against the other, weigh in her hands the rent-roll, and estimate the worth of her valuables. But the involuntary pleasure by which she was overcome, the intoxication which she tried to resist, were not without alloy. As the fear of almost having lost this heritage rendered the possession of it more keenly precious to her, so the consciousness of this great fortune was accompanied in her mind with anxieties, suspicion, and torments of all kinds; the leaven of economy, the fear of being robbed—could she be sure of Labric?—fermented in her troubled mind. Every now and then she felt her heart contract spasmodically, suspected words and looks, and tried to fathom people's thoughts. Such a change was taking place on her countenance that Alice was stupefied by it.

She, too, had been passing through violent emotions. Seized with astonishment by the flight of the motor, quickly losing all trace of it, M. de Souché having been picked up seriously injured some three miles from there, it was by means of the telegraph, operated in all directions, that she and Raymonde had learnt the truth. Le Vigreux had devoted himself to the transportation of the two women; the one motionless for ever, enclosed between four planks of wood, the other stretched out on a mattress in a closed carriage, quite pallid, and like a mummy in her white bandages.

She would always see that lugubrious procession, and also her sister's appearance of intimacy—

as soon as she was assured as to the fate of her mother—with Le Vigreux, who assumed the position of master—so one would have said—ordering everything, and watching over everything. She had surprised many things at that time; things at which the virginal pride of her young girl's soul had revolted. How had they dared, in the absence of the husband who was the responsible guarantee of Raymonde's reputation, hide their guilty familiarity so slightly?

She did not know that Raymonde, selfish as ever, and taking survey of herself, had been considering the peril with which her beauty—so precious to her, more perhaps than her very life—had just been threatened. Had it not been owing to her inspiration to avoid the ride in the motor, she also—who knows—might have suffered her aunt's fate or, worse still, might have had her beautiful face torn to pieces, and been made a cripple for life—an object of horror. It was Mark's presence which had saved her from such a fate! It was because he had been there, and to remain at his side, that she had been driven in the victoria. She shivered at the thought of it all, and once more surrounded his person with her tender gratitude and ardent belief in him, looking up to him as the firm support of her feminine weakness, her preserver from ill luck. Quite in good faith she was grieved at the unfortunate fate which had befallen her aunt, and had wept during the sad funeral ceremony; then, without bearing any malice, and by a natural inclination of her thoughts, she had not been able to prevent herself from saying that a special miracle had befallen her, and that the

transfer of this fortune to her mother constituted a very desirable chance—but what an abominable thought it was that her poor dear mamma might possibly have been taken too; she also! And with an her might she waved to one side the thoughts which rose up in the flickering shadow of such a picture! . . . And in order to convince herself of the pifeness of her joy at seeing the wounded one being cured, she surrounded her with dainty demonstrations, and coaxing words—little smiling attentions. It was certainly not a want of sentiment, was it, to say to herself, "If mamma wishes, it will be easy enough for her to do what the aunt would not even hear of, and offer Gilles the price of my liberty, some hundreds of thousand francs—and she wouldn't be any the poorer for it—which would quickly conciliate his *amour-propre*, and secure my freedom. After all, it would only be an advance upon my future inheritance; a future that I count upon, very far off, of course—poor dear mamma, let us hope she will live a hundred years!"

But when she was in a condition to lend herself to a consideration of this kind, Mme. Brevier eluded all positive statements under the pretext that her head was still too much shaken. She must give the matter reflection, not hasten anything; and in herself she thought, "How Raymonde rushes on! Four or five hundred thousand francs, indeed! Any one can see well enough that the money isn't hers!"

The idea that in all justice they owed Gilles the reimbursement of his patrimony only came to her after much thought; and if any one had questioned her as to the moral legitimacy of her rights

to inherit this fortune—the forced legacy of a woman whom she had not cared for—she would have been greatly astonished. Nor did she entertain any doubts as to the righteousness of her acceptance of these millions, which she well knew to be soiled by mud and tainted with blood; shamefully piled up by that pirate of an Eloi!

She now opened all her letters herself, and re-read those which had first come. There was one from Mme. de Boyséon, alluding to her faithful friendship, and discreetly congratulating her at the end—as if she could possibly nurture an illusion as to any plastering up of a marriage between her son and Alice! Mme. Brevier had burst into a fit of abrupt laughter. Oh, yes! now the world was coming back! And there was Madame Hottmann who, up to the present had never sent her a line, and was now becoming resuscitated, and overwhelming her with affectionate protestations. And the Leloup d'Ygrés, of whom she had never heard a word! And the Mascarnes! And Dr. le Dave, married again to a very young woman! And Trac, that good fellow, Trac! And all the rest of them! Ah, indeed, it was a fine thing to be rich!

And the more she became conscious of all this, the more were her feelings modified in regard to her aunt who had been a good creature at bottom, and whose characteristics seemed less unpleasant now that she had no longer to suffer from them. Thus she had learnt with indignation of the inconceivable attitude of Mdle. Duverset, who was a monster of ingratitude. When informed of the death of her benefactress, this unfortunate creature

—being only partly dressed in her petticoat and stays at the time—had begun to dance about like a madwoman, uttering inarticulate cries with an expression on her face of cynical delight, and making such strange gestures that they seemed, for such a plain angular woman, the height of immodesty! She had been immediately dismissed.

She also thought of Michel without any tenderness. He was very proud, was M. Lorin! Sent for by telegram, he had arrived the same day and departed the following one, after having announced that he did not look forward to any immediate complication! Should he not have stopped to take care of her himself, instead of sending down to her, as if he were some great lord, a house-surgeon and a trained nurse? No *immediate* complication—she hoped not indeed! . . . Her haughty brows knit together, and an expression of gravity and pride ran over her face, as if she were asking herself certain questions, seeking in herself some mysterious warnings from the depths of her organs, all turned topsy-turvy by the horrible shock. Internal lesions! These words, in which a confused dread penetrated, returned to her now and again without cause, for she was not suffering any pain. Why then think of them? No, she had no pain—at least so it seemed to her.

Alice remarked that for some days past she had not asked for news of M. de Souché. The letters he wrote her, one of which announced his visit on the following Thursday, left her quite indifferent. Did she now consider him of too beggarly importance? Did she consider unworthy of her, now that she was prosperous, a project upon which

she had smiled when it presented itself as one of the only forms of salvation for her?

She had the impression that her mother did not mean this detachment for M. de Souché only, but for all those surrounding her, and she felt it the more cruelly when she was alone in her mother's society. Alice had quite understood that Michel had not been willing to accept more than what was strictly necessary from a hospitality painful to his dignity, dispensed by the self-assumed protection of a Le Vigreux. Now that he, Michel, had gone off once more, the only being upon whom she could rely, who could come to her in her distress?

Why did it seem to her that, since the catastrophe had happened, something quite indescribable had changed every one's expression, even to the sound of their voices? Why did those restless gleams rise up in the eyes of her mother and sister? It was that cursed gold which appeared to assert some unknown occult influence over them all; even she, whose nerves were so well balanced, saw the huge phantom of her aunt Eloi wandering about the passages!

One evening after she had kissed her mother, who was more serious than usual, and quite indifferent to her kiss, and whose look was fixed on the wall—what did she see and hear there in the silence? Alice was awakened suddenly in the middle of the night by a piercing scream and groans . . . she ran to her. Mme. Brevier was writhing on her bed with frightful spasms and vomitings, her hands clutching at her stomach.

"Raymonde, Raymonde!" called Alice, knocking at her sister's door, "mamma is dying."

The next day Mme. Brevier was carried to a Sanatorium at Tours, where the surgeons decided upon the operation of laparotomy to be performed at once. A latent appendicitis was revealed, which had been set into activity by the shock, and perforation and peritonitis were the result.

CHAPTER VII

M. DE SOUCHÉ descended from his victoria, made a little sign of condescension at old Joseph, and threw a look of gratitude at his two bay carriage-horses. The good creatures! No accident to fear from them! He pulled himself upright—that wretched sprain in the back still bothered him—and rang the bell of the white iron gates. They opened of themselves, and he passed through them into the big silent grounds. At the far end the Sanatorium showed its dumb frontage with the white blinds all of a row in the lifeless-looking windows. He mounted the flight of steps, wandered into the hall and through a wide passage until he came to a little parlour. Impressed by the quietness of this abode, as though uninhabited, he coughed and moved a chair. One of the ward nurses, in a linen uniform, came along, and he said in a faltering voice, “I have come to ask news of Mme. Brevier.”

The nurse, a large, red-faced lazy-looking woman, answered, “She has borne the operation all right. If Monsieur will tell me his name, I will let Mme. d’Arbelles or Mdle. Brevier know.”

He handed her his card and waited. The door closed without a sound. His footsteps on the linoleum seemed muffled, and the walls as though

lined with felt. Never had he been impressed by such a silence. In this abode of suffering one ought only to speak in whispers, and walk on the tips of one's toes! Even the tic-tac of the clock could scarcely be heard! M. de Souché shook his head with a sensation of sadness at his heart. Since the fatal day he had been having some strange thoughts, and the pleasure of finding himself still alive, after the shock of his fall in the ploughed field, was vitiated by the hatred that he dedicated, in his ingenious selfishness, to the malevolence of fate. This hatred he had extended involuntarily to the beings who had participated in the adventure; to that Raymonde d'Arbelles, with her free-and-easy impudence; to Mme. Brevier, who ought to have protested and reserved for herself the journey in the carriage with him, and to Mme. Le Martin, whose atrocious end he had been so near sharing!

And he had suffered all that because he had had the politeness, forced upon him, to get into that unlucky motor! His love had experienced a blow from it; it was quite enough to dishearten the most sanguine of men! Without the presence of these ladies and their neighbourhood, nothing would have happened; he was tranquil before. They had brought him disturbing emotions of the heart, and into danger—nothing had so much mortified him as his fall! He, whose fist could stop a runaway horse by the head, was obliged to see himself helplessly thrown and violently expelled from that raging catapult, without any chance of conquering it or paralyzing the wretched creature who was letting it run wild!

Thus he preserved a bitterness from the remembrance of it all !

His convalescence, serving his outraged feelings to a certain point, had justified his non-appearance at the manor. He was angry with Mme. Brevier for not having shown more interest in him, for, outside Mme. Le Martin, he considered he was the most to be pitied in all this affair. But when he had learnt that Mme. Brevier, suddenly in danger, was going to submit to a serious operation, he had been deeply moved. He forgot his own grievances in hers, forming prayers all the more sincere that he bethought himself of the price attached to that precious health, the wonderful increase in value that it signified. Sufficiently disinterested for having thought of demanding her hand in marriage without any return, he had no cause for disdaining the splendid chance with which a terrible and unforeseen fatality—a double aspect of the catastrophe—rewarded his self-denial.

His tenderness, for one moment affected by the fear that this poor woman might be disfigured, was reawakened and reassured by the knowledge that she would remain as beautiful as before. He pictured her to himself, convalescent, restored to health, queen of la Bécassière. In order to please her, he was quite resigned beforehand to new household improvements, such as steam-heated rooms, an Italian terrace—a lordly acquisition—and the repainting of all the woodwork ! But these tentative schemes could not distract his mind from the feeling of heaviness and disquietude which weighed upon him in this abode of mystery, this building benumbed as by sleep and death.

The nurse returned and said that the ladies begged to be excused from coming down, because they could not leave the patient, and Mme. Brevier wished him to know how very much she appreciated his kind inquiries.

Thoughtfully, he turned away. Nobody accompanied him, and the iron gates opened in front of him as before. He closed them quietly, cast one more glance at the front of the building over which the declining daylight seemed to cast a still more serious aspect with its immovable window-blinds, and, with a sigh, again seated himself in his carriage.

Raymonde, in the room she occupied near her mother's, had not considered it necessary to disturb herself, because she was writing to Le Vigreux. Her first alarms past, and hope returned, she was contemplating the possibility of a little run to Paris, as she confessed to herself that really she was indifferently constituted for illness and death. She was longing to see Mark again, and, for the first time, nervous from contact with this dramatic atmosphere, she was tormenting herself, being consumed by vague jealousies and chimerical fears, thrown out of her orbit, as it were, and craving for the feeling of comfort which she would find beside her lover and master.

What a fright they had had! What emotions! In her passionate love of youth, health, pleasure, and laughter, Raymonde was feeling frightfully depressed. This building, where the goings and comings all wore an appearance of discreet complicity, filled her sleepless nights with fears and gloomy visions, and she thirsted to escape once more into life and light.

In the white room, with the bare walls, in which there was nothing to interfere with the sight or disturb the mind, Mme. Brevier, stretched out on her bed with closed eyes, avoided speaking. Alice was reading in one corner of the room. At the baron's name she had watched her mother's look, willing to take him news of her.

"Stop here," Mme. Brevier had said; she could not be left alone. A living presence alone relieved her mind of the mysterious dread with which the immovability and rigidity of the articles of furniture, inspired her. Sounds, colours, everything that lives and moves had become a morbid necessity for her; she was hungry to see, hear, and touch every breathing thing. She had still such a feeble hold on the world of those who come, who go, who talk; she was still so vacant, so detached, so incapable of movement, wrapped in wadding, as it were, confused in thought! One idea only persisted clearly in her mind, that she was escaping for the second time from the clutches of the invisible power which had dragged her to the edge of the gulf whence there is no return. To live! She wanted to live! That had been her only thought on coming out of the sickening coma which follows upon the action of an anæsthetic, and the racking sensation of her flesh so profoundly cut into. The agony she had passed through had been so terrible, and everything seemed to be escaping her hands just as fate was filling them up to the brim! It would have been too unjust, too horrible! But she would live; she would have her fill of pleasures amidst a recovered security; and the very ardour of her hope gave to her eyes, her cheeks, a peculiar

expression of intensity which painfully affected Alice when she looked at her. Her poor mother had changed so profoundly in a few days! Her faded hair exposed the roots of a different colour, and her face, no longer enlivened by the brilliancy of paint and powder, showed in its bony hollows the sallowness of an elderly coquette. Such as she had become, she still possessed that beauty which pain engraves on the countenance, and her emaciated features seemed impressed by a more subtle soulfulness.

Alice still hoped, for had not the surgeon been reassuring? All the same, a dumb fear crept into her thoughts. She remembered Michel's significant silence, when he had hastened there at the first telephone call, his anxious brow, his evasive answers. Why had he gone off again, as at the first time—abandoned her once more? And, with a feeling of infinite melancholy, she gazed at a last ray of sunlight whitening the window blind; it disappeared, and almost immediately the room was filled with shadow..

"Alice!" called out the invalid.

She went to the bedside. Mme. Brevier looked at her with wide-open eyes, as if surprised at seeing her. Then, turning her head to the wall, she said—

"I shall not marry M. de Souché."

There was a silence, and then she continued, in a toneless and neutral voice—

"It would be madness. I am much wealthier than he is. I can marry whom I like, it will be a question of which one to choose amongst numbers. To begin with, he is too old, too

ugly. . . . Why is there so much wind? Oh yes, the leaves! They are falling, flying, running about. Stop! I don't want to die. . . . Ah! the road, the trees; we are going to smash up!"

"Mamma, dear!" implored Alice. She had taken her mother's hands in hers, and felt them burning. The fever had suddenly returned again, and delirium with it.

"I am saved! . . . How fortunate it is!" Tears slowly flowed through the closed eyelids.

"*Bon Dieu!* The crash! Why must I bear this last trial? The crash! . . . The aunt is ruined! . . . Her millions, my millions . . . Hottmann has taken them all. I am poor; I can only beg."

"Mamma, dear mamma!" sobbed Alice.

"Everything is sold! Our house, Rosenoire, my jewellery, dresses . . . there is nothing more belonging to me; I am in the street. . . . Oh! it is frightful! A bit of bread, if you please. . . . What, Pierre, you refuse it to me, your wife!"

Raymonde entered with a smile on her lips, but stopped, transfixed. The wailing voice was rising, and Mme. Brevier was trying to sit upright. The nurse ran in, and from that moment it was, for that soul in distress, a night which at first was agitated by attacks of vertigo and formless words, galloping without check through an endless jumble of talk, followed by a night of torpor, so dense that they did not know whether, at times, she either heard or understood. A night traversed by the footsteps of physicians, and orders given in a low voice. A night which seemed already one in which the eyelids are sealed, the nostrils become pinched, and the cooling body is no longer but clay in human form,

waiting for the gravedigger. That long night saw three sunrises and three sunsets visit the abode of silence. The fourth day, about eleven o'clock, Jeanne Brevier's sufferings ended. Raymonde, who had gone to take some rest, was dozing. There was only near the dying creature Alice, on her knees at the bedside, and Michel, standing motionless.

At the first signs of delirium the latter had returned, powerless, gloomy, at the sight of science being conquered by pitiless disease. Since the operation, he had looked upon Mme. Brevier as lost. He took Alice gently by the hand, in spite of her resistance, and led her to Mme. d'Arbellès' room. But she did not go in. In the corridor a young woman, with a sorrowful face, opened her arms, and she recognized her dear friend, with tears in her eyes, who looked at her with pitying tenderness—Miss Smollett. Alice threw herself into the visitor's arms, calling out—

"Florence!"

"Weep, dearest, weep," the latter answered.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE afternoon in December, Michel Lorin returned to his little flat in the rue Vavin. It was foggy, the damp was penetrating, and the thaw was converting the streets into a sea of mud. He was hurrying, in order not to arrive too late for his consulting hour; for, although he did not expect many patients, he made a duty of punctuality. Much overworked, he had of late grown thinner and paler, and a hard expression—which only softened in the presence of his patients—betokened the gravity of his preoccupations. On letting himself in with his latchkey, he found his housekeeper in the act of rubbing with very particular care the brass knobs of the doors to make them shine. On his asking whether anybody had been there, she replied—

“No, sir.”

Having hurg up his soft felt hat and overcoat on the hatstand, he went into the dining-room, which was very simply furnished with its brown oilcloth and sideboard ornamented with rustic china, and washed his hands at a little wash-hand-stand, then passed into his consulting-room, which adjoined a small waiting-room. He had not been able to make up his mind to take a more comfortable flat, because of his disgust for

everything that savoured of show and self-advertisement. For such a long time now he had become accustomed to the old worn door of entrance on the street, the carpetless stairway, the iron banisters and broken tiles of the landings. He had not even changed his wall papers, and only a few old engravings on the walls and some books in valuable bindings in a polished walnut-wood bookcase testified to artistic tastes which he had but little time to gratify.

As if he were chasing an importunate thought, he shook his head and opened a medical review, cutting its leaves. No, he did not wish to think of anything but his professional work. What was the use of eating out his heart in mad dreams, sterile regrets? Had he not foreseen from the first day that his fate and Alice's could never, and would never, come together? The misfortune he had always feared was realized, and she was rich. By the irony of fate, Aunt Eloi's millions were divided between her and Raymonde. The barrier, which for a moment had been cast down by Brevier's death and ruin, and had isolated the young girl and forbade self-interested covetousness, was now raised higher than ever.

Could he do any less than rejoice that she would not be exposed to the evil chances of life, that she would be free and independent, in so far as the yoke of money would not too deeply enslave her soul? It was evidently written in the book of fate that he was to remain a bachelor. If he could not give his life to the one for whom so willingly he would have completely sacrificed himself, he was always free to devote himself, without counting

the cost, to his flock of the poor and disgraced, for those who implored his help without truce, his mournful train of sacrificed human beings. When a man has faith in his mission of healing the sick, and, above all, in his capacity of moral comforter, was he not an apostle as well as a physician? But in vain he braced up his will power, at times his heart failed him, and he felt a hatred for life so badly arranged—for the injustice of fate.

As for some people everything was difficult, so for others everything arranged itself without concern for the observance of any moral law, outside all justice and equity! There was Raymonde, for instance, who, without in the least deserving it, by one of fate's caprices, was suddenly plunged into the life of luxury, which represented materially for her the supreme ideal. These millions which could have done so much good by being transformed into asylums and giving food, warmth, and clothes to a crowd of unfortunate creatures; these millions, in her conscienceless hands, were being spent in a fairyland of extravagance, in glittering streams of ridiculous and useless things. No! there was no equilibrium in the game of unstable forces which govern human lives! While there were so many human beings holding on to an obscure altruism, to a modest solidarity, devoting themselves to one another, drudging twelve hours a day, and never having their hunger quite satisfied, Raymonde was monopolizing for her own personal benefit, and consecrating to the most selfish of pleasures, all those ill-gotten gains and tainted gold, that only a noble use would have purified. Was this all! No! as long as so many oppressed creatures are

struggling in the chains forged by laws, customs, opinions; as long as one witnesses every day good women beaten, ruined, exploited by their husbands, and submitting to veritable tortures; so long as by social injustice or by poverty, or by other high-handed measures, even the hope of freedom is forbidden to them; so long as his father, the great Buftert, had not been able to recognize his son, or give his name to his devoted companion, and was riveted for thirty long years to a body without a soul, shut up in a madhouse; so long as all this and more, would Raymonde revel in her liberty.

Indifferent to conjugal duties, a bad wife, having cast overboard from the first the burden of motherhood, selfish, venal, an adulteress in addition, wearing an appearance of sympathy, due to her easy good nature, and possessing a perishable beauty at the mercy of accident or disease, she was going to override the law and obtain from the courts a divorce *à l'amiable*, which would permit her to marry Le Vigreux. Not without some trouble, it is true. But what a comic spectacle—if the moment had not been so solemn—Gilles had presented when he arrived from Naples in time to assist at his mother-in-law's burial. An icy coldness existed between husband and wife, and negotiations were immediately opened up by Maître Labric. Gilles had shown resistance, strong in his legal right of the matrimonial community of goods, he being also enriched by the unexpected inheritance. While still afraid that his wife would publicly forget all decency with Le Vigreux he entered upon some first-class bargainings and consented to the divorce for the paltry sum of five

hundred thousand francs—a very much lower sum than he might have exacted. But a man of his distinguished position, it was to be well understood, could not make a question of self-interest from such a transaction! And from all this, in about a year, Raymonde would be called Madame Marc Le Vigreux.

And as for the last named, whose passion at least was sincere enough—little worthy of respect as it was in such a chief of adventurers—he was nothing more than a fleecer of men's pockets, and divulger of their scandals; a promotor of suspicious companies; a supporter of rotten interests; a past-master of blackmail, prostituting the letter-press of his newspaper, and choking freedom of thought. And yet, was it justice that this man, adulated, hated, traduced, feared, supported by a tribe of clients of every class and all professions, that he should triumph in his insolence through the audacity of money? He would be happy, he would possess the woman he loved; indifferent to the one who had formerly borne his name, and who had submitted herself to the rôle of betrayed wife, and then been finally abandoned; indifferent alike to the men and women whom he had cast aside after making use of them!

Was there not in all this a challenge to conscience, an outrage to rectitude, to honour which was flouted? Ah! yes indeed! Life was badly arranged, life, which set up on the shield the conquering ones, the gamblers, the disreputable, and let such a formidable mass of grief and misery groan in darkness.

The door-bell sounded. He put down the

review, of which he had not been able to read two lines, and, as soon as he perceived there was somebody in the waiting-room, he opened the door and recognized an old patient of his, one of those who never paid him, and into whose hands Michel often slipped a silver piece when he left. Listening to the complaints of the old workman, and cheering him with kindly words, turned aside the current of his thoughts. In face of illness he never thought of anything else, and he scarcely heard the sound of the bell a second time.

Dressed in the deepest mourning, Alice entered the little cold waiting-room. Received into the home of Florence, now Mrs. Harrison, and treated by her and her husband more as a sister than a friend, she had felt during the past weeks—despite their delicately expressed pity and loving attentions—as though she were floating about like a wreck, in such a disabled condition that nothing any longer kept her fastened to a normal existence.

In losing her mother, it seemed to her that the last bonds were untied that had united her to the family in which, up till then, she had been known as Mademoiselle Brevier, born to a certain position and bred in a certain social class, dependent to such an extent on necessary or fortuitous contingencies, that she could not think of herself as anything else, or as standing outside this inelastic circle. All her past seemed now to be dropping from her and drifting away; from henceforth she was alone in the world. Raymonde would leave her side, and she would be left to herself. She could not accept Le Vigoureux's amicably proffered protection, and she asked nothing of anybody. She could not go

on living beyond a certain time with the Harrisons, and accepting a hospitality that their friendship would have made final. No, she was alone! It was true that she was wealthy, most unexpectedly wealthy, as in a fairy-tale. In the midst of his proffered condolences, Maître Labric had expressed his respectful congratulations, and she had seen secret looks of envy directed at her, such as had brought home to Mme. Brevier, not so long since, the homage and admiration that the world pays to the all-powerful monarch, the god of gold!

But no joy had come to her from this fortune tainted with the blood of her mother and her aunt, this fortune that she had never coveted, never been jealous of, to the inheritance of which she did not consider she had any moral right, and whose corrupt and poisonous source—having thought the matter over for a long while—she despised, coming as it did from theft, fraud, lies, and baseness. She had been enlightened, and she knew that the uncle Eloi had been a foetid beast of prey, who during the conquest of these millions had piled up around him filth, dishonour, despair, and ruin. She felt towards these fatal millions a sort of holy horror, because of all the vileness and meanness she had seen them giving birth to in the souls of those who possessed them, if only for a day.

There would be coming to her, from the fragments of her mother's jointure—the money gained honestly by her father—after sharing with Raymond, about four thousand francs income; enough to live upon. She would be quite satisfied with it. As for her aunt Eloi's inheritance, of which her mother had had only such brief possession—

accompanied as it was not only with the rapture of holding it in her convulsed hands, but with the dread of losing it—she would have none of it! For many days and nights she had considered the problem which her scruples imposed upon her. Granted that she did not feel herself bound to use these millions for herself, who could prevent her from giving them up to good and charitable deeds? She was only perplexed as to the means of doing it. If well advised, how many injustices she might be able to make amends for, how many wounds she might heal, hopes re-open, and happiness create! Ah! yes, face to face with the incurable scourge which condemns so many thousands of human beings to hunger and disease; which causes the death of so many infants and young children; which allows so many old workers, at the end of their tether, to die like dogs in some garret; face to face with the universal fate of poverty and suffering, these millions would be but a very small thing; the drop of water, as described in the gospel given in the name of Christ. Would it matter whether she were a believer or not; if she gave it up without carrying a drop of it to her own lips, and gave it with simplicity of heart, without ostentation as without regret?

But did she even possess this right to give away such an enormous fortune; to assume the providential role of philanthropist? By what right was she accepting, in the formal name of the law, this fortune of which she disapproved? Would she not be taking upon herself the merit of an action that was too easy? Did she not get rid of it thus too cheaply and—whatever might be her

sincerity—in a manner too flattering to her pride, and pleasing to her disinterestedness? Whether she wished it or not, might not a feeling of vanity mingle with this action; and, whether she called herself to account for it or not, would she not be acting as a kind of ostentatious patroness, and—according to the world's ways—be giving a donation as so many philanthropists do, as much for their own gratification as benefactors as for the good of the recipients?

But if she refused this inheritance, who would profit by it? Raymonde! Raymonde already so rich that her marriage with Le Vigreux made her a multi-millionaire many times over—and this when there were so many failures in life, unselfish martyrdoms, and unfortunate but honourable people! Would it be possible, even tolerable! Would it not be the height of absurdity? . . . But was she herself to be burdened with the anxiety of administering justice, and making the equitable distribution that her reason would approve? In order to do this it was absolutely necessary that she should feel herself able, without a moment's hesitation or doubt, to accept and utilize this immense fortune of ill-gotten wealth. Should she be able to do so?

Not for one instant had she any suspicion of the honour and loyalty of her friend Florence; and yet Mrs. Harrison had immediately made reply—

“Why, darling, how can you ask such a question? You are very, very proud, Alice, dear; and you know that pride has always a diabolical quality about it—remember that. Because you are so proud you hate to dip your hands into that contaminated gold; but when you are nursing an

invalid you, do it from duty, although the task is often a painful one. And what does it matter to you that this gold may be repulsive, corrupt, if you convert it into something new and clean by the use you make of it? You can call down so many blessings on your head! Think of it, Alice; think of all the good you can do!" The latter did not make any answer, and Florence continued, "Ask James. You have every confidence in his judgment; haven't you? You know how upright he is; how clear-headed and incapable of deceiving you. I, being a woman, I may judge sentimentally about it; but he will only be guided by his reason. Listen to him."

James Harrison, whom she went to call, came in and sat down, after placing his crutches beside him. He rubbed his thin hands together, and a kindly smile lit up his earnest-looking eyes and his clean-shaven strong face. He listened with composure, and replied briefly, with the practical commonsense of his nationality—

"I think quite seriously, the same as Florence. If you don't take your share of the inheritance, it will go to your sister and her new husband; and they have no need of it, for it would be only badly spent, and not according to justice. I think you should resign yourself to being rich during the time it will take you to use all that wealth in the best possible way." And again, this time, Alice made no answer.

How would Michel look upon it all? But he was prejudiced through his headstrong and positive character. And, besides, he would not be in a position to pronounce an unreserved opinion. He

would excuse himself haughtily, not being willing to dispossess her of a fortune that he despised, or give her any advice as to its disposal. He would entrench himself as usual behind his gloomy pride. What he would think, what he had always thought, she knew well; but he might wish that she would repudiate the obstacle which again separated them; the eternal obstacle that kept alive the reciprocal and unswerving pride they both possessed!

And she herself—admitting that she renounced this fortune—would she not be obeying an instinctive hope of bringing herself nearer to him, and rendering possible—perhaps even sure—that happiness which she had given up counting upon, that she scarcely confessed to herself, and yet which was the only desire of her soul and of the recesses of her heart? But why should he not approve of her following the Harrisons' advice, to receive this money and hold it in trust for those who were in need of it, and assist those dead seeds, fruitless until now, to blossom in health, warmth and well being? And again she asked herself, what would Michel think?

At the thought of asking him the question, a peculiar, a profound shrinking held her back. How far he was from her at present, that friend whose presence and watchful affection of former days, had been so sweet to her! During the trying hours he had doubtless shown himself attentive and devoted—but, oh, how distant! Certainly he no longer cared for her. He had grown tired of their uncertain relations, their jealous coldness, their restrained impulses. No, she would not ask his advice.

Was there any one who could give her advice?

If only her father had been there, her true father, not the Brevier with his white head and heavy-looking face, with the smooth hands of those last few years, alas! but the dark and active Brevier, the indefatigable fighter, whom, as a child, she had admired so much, and in whom her faith was so entire that every word of his was imprinted on her memory in ineffaceable letters! If only she had him to go to! For a long time past she had been communicating with and questioning him in spirit, in that mortal silence which can make no response.

Before going to see Michel, she had had a conversation with Maître Labric, who had received her at once, putting off two noted clients, and, one hour after, with a lively gravity, had shown her as far as the staircase, bending deeply his bald head. Like an arrow, with her head raised high and with a quick step, as if she had got rid of a heavy load of care, she went on foot to the rue Vavin.

There was a sound of voices, and she heard Michel showing some one out of the door. When the handle creaked in the lock she felt a shock. He bowed without recognizing her at first in the half light, then he murmured in a startled voice, "You?—and I have been keeping you waiting!" and their hands were impulsively clasped together.

"Yes, Michel, it is I."

CHAPTER IX

SHE was so deeply moved that she did not know whether she was really there in person or delivered over to one of those dreams which transport one into the most improbable realities.

"You are quite well?" he asked.

She lowered her head, and said, "I wanted to see you, Michel, since you dropped coming any more. . . ."

He looked at her. It was true that a very foolish jealousy had interfered, as if he ought not to have been more than grateful to the Harrisons for having given Alice, in her fearful solitude, an honourable shelter, a warm and comfortable home! But he would always be thus, gloomy-tempered and unsociable, eaten out with pride and wounding those whom he most wanted to serve. . . . As he could only give insufficient reasons, he preferred to remain silent.

"I did not wish to go away without wishing you good-bye," she said.

He turned pale and she saw, in spite of the calm he tried to put upon himself, that his hands, which happened to be fingering a paper-knife, were trembling.

"You are going away?"

"Yes, Michel, I am thinking of leaving Paris."

"Ah!"

"And leaving France. Here I am buried under too many painful memories which hold me enslaved to others and to myself. Florence wants me to go with them, they are going to settle in Australia, and probably I shall decide to accompany them. I shall find a way of making myself useful over there, and shall begin again another life."

"Why need you go so far?"

"I have too many sorrows here."

"And you will not regret anybody you leave behind, will you?"

She felt the bitterness of the reproach, and said in a low voice, "Yes, Michel, I shall regret you very much."

He could no longer contain himself, and tears came into his eyes; ashamed of his weakness, he murmured, "Why do you go away then?"

"Because I am poor, Michel; and although I have enough to live upon, I ought to increase my resources by work."

"You, poor?" He smiled bitterly.

She looked him full in the face and answered, "Yes, I have just come from the notary's, where I have been to refuse my aunt Eloi's inheritance."

She saw him blush deeply, and his eyes shine with joy. Convulsively he took her hands and crushed them between his. "You have done that, Alice, you? Oh, it is a fine action and worthy of you!"

"There is no merit in it. I have hesitated, I must confess, and have tried to think of a way to make a better use of this money. But on reflection, I did not believe I had the right to accept it."

"Yes, Alice, you have done right, and you will never regret it."

And he admired her, admired her passionately—he wanted to kneel at her feet. Not for one moment did any doubt touch him ever so slightly. Yes, yes, she had done right; she had acted honourably in all truth! He would not be influenced by any return upon himself, no indeed—for it was not of himself that he was thinking at that moment—the tenderness which he felt towards her was quite disinterested. He was judging the act arbitrarily, with all his rigid and honourable notions.

And at seeing him happy she tasted a supreme reward. Then he approved of what she had done, unreservedly, and without objection, he looked upon it as quite a simple thing to do! How glad she was only to have listened to her conscience—and also perhaps, from the depths of that silence consulted—to the secret voice of the good man to whom she owed her birth!

"And now you know the situation, tell me if you think I ought to go away?"

"What do you mean, Alice?" he asked, bewildered, not daring to hope, not daring to understand.

She put her hands upon his shoulders, and said, "Are you deaf and blind, Michel, is it for me to tell you that I love you?"

"Is it true, my dear one?" And he felt himself seized by such an enthusiastic worship for her that he wondered whether he should not die of joy.

With a countenance overcome by emotion, blushing with maidenly shame, she said to him—

"Do you want me, Michel?"

"Do I want you, Alice? I have loved you from the first hour . . . and I have always looked upon you as belonging to me, and if it had not been for my stupid obstinacy. . . . Oh yes! blind and deaf apparently . . . but now! . . ."

"You will have me to keep, Michel dear, I shall burden your existence."

"A precious burden, and a light one! My beloved one, you come to me such as I always wanted you to come. It is I who can only offer you an existence, unworthy of you, without daintiness, without luxuries, an existence with a man who belongs very little to himself, because hard work and others are requiring him every minute, but a man who will give you unceasingly the best of himself, his devotion, his friendship, his soul."

"I know it is so, Michel, and I take you with confidence. I, also, I have loved you from the beginning. . . ."

"My betrothed—my wife!"

And their lips were pressed together for the first time.

It was another December, in the same study, but a fire in the grate crackled gaily. A year had passed away. The evening lamp spread around its peaceful circle of light, and Alice was nursing her first-born, the little Pierre. She was following with an attentive expression of face the child's voracious mouthfuls, and feeling with pleasure the warm nourishment flow through her breast, and descend into the supple frail little body. Michel

looked on gravely. Happiness had changed the expression of his physiognomy, and softened the brusquerie of his movements. On his knees was lying, unfolded, an evening paper which he only took up to read after quite a long time. A smile gradually formed under his brown moustache as he read in a low tone: "To-day, at the ninth mayoralty, has been celebrated with much magnificence the marriage of M. Marc le Vigreux, director of La Vie, officer of the Legion of Honour, to Mme. Raymonde Brevier, daughter of the one-time member of the Chamber of Deputies, and director of The Four Seasons. Hundreds upon hundreds of curiosity-mongers blocked up the adjacent streets which were with difficulty kept clear by the officials in authority. The *All-Paris* of the press, finance, commerce, arts and literature thronged to this ceremony to offer its congratulations to our brilliant *confrère* and his beautiful young wife. Amongst those present, in the first rows—for it would be impossible to give all the names—we recognized the Minister of War and the Minister of the Colonies, Senator Morande with a number of his colleagues and deputies, Dr. and Mme. Le Dave, M. Leloup d'Ygré, Mme. de Cicé, Mme. de Boyséon, the widow of General Boyséon, Mme. Mérienne, Mme. Aguilano, Mme. Hottmann, M. Mascarnes, M. Trac, Maître Vapaille, etc., etc."

An expressive silence ensued in which Alice looked tenderly at her husband, and then turned her eyes once more on her baby. The fire crackled and flashed with joyous sparks, and three roses spread their fragrance from a crystal vase.

An atmosphere of gentle cheerfulness radiated through the room.

Michel put the newspaper in the wastepaper-basket, and said, while seating himself at his writing-desk, "I must be getting ready my lecture for to-morrow. May I have your permission to work?"

THE END

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